

Crime and Culture in Chechnya:
From the Russian Empire to the Second Chechen War

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctorate of Philosophy

with a

Major in History

in the

College of Graduate Studies

University of Idaho

by

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July 2015

Authorization to Submit Dissertation

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Abstract

The dissertation will historically look at how and why the Chechens have become known worldwide for their criminal organizations and skills. It will also look at the evolution and melding of the two worlds of organized crime and terrorism in the context of the Northern Caucasus region and Russia as a whole. It will discuss how Chechen society is historically based on clans with very little centralized control making crime and punishment something that was done within the clans as opposed to traditional law enforcement. Chechens, and surrounding republics, also have a Robin-Hood type outlaw called *abreks* who are traditionally looked at as outcasts from society, but are also romanticized. This is especially true when the *abreks* began fighting the invading Russian Army in the mid-nineteenth century. It also looks at the role of Islam in the Republic, and how it remained strong even when it was outlawed during the Soviet Period. The religion, though practiced illegally during that time, was what kept the society together. The post-Soviet period is then looked at, specifically the rise of criminality not only within the republic, but their rise in Russia as well. Lastly, the rise of Islamism will be touched upon in the sense that by the end of the twentieth century into the twenty-first, criminality and terrorism went hand in hand in the republic thus affecting the whole world. It will be argued that social norms, the romanticizing of crime against the Russian intruders, and religion all create a perfect storm that has made the Chechen organized criminal syndicates some of the most feared and respected in the world.

Acknowledgements

A special thanks to all the professors and staff in the History Department who taught me how to be a better student, teacher, and researcher.

Dedications

This is to my family. My mother Val and my sister Mollie for their editing and life wisdom, and my father Jeff and step-mother Erika for their patience in this very long journey that is finally coming to an end. Thanks for everything.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Map 1: Chechnya and Surrounding Republics



On 11 December 1994, without an official declaration of war, Russian President Boris Yeltsin ordered troops to enter the breakaway Republic of Chechnya. His first speech explaining this action came 16 days later in a nationally televised address. The president gave two fundamental reasons for the invasion: the first was that Chechnya was an indivisible part of Russia, and that no territory had the right to secede from the federation. The second reason given was because the reign of banditry and criminality on Chechen soil posed a danger to the Russian Federation.¹ Three months later, as the war bloodied and public opinion began to turn, the president reiterated his stance claiming the only mistake made was not going into the republic sooner. In a February news conference, it was admitted that the Russian government had waited too long to employ troops hoping the situation would solve itself and that compromise was possible. But, argued Yeltsin, that was a fatal mistake.² He went on to compare the "criminal dictatorship" of the Chechen government to that of the Colombian Medellin cartel and the golden triangle of Southeast Asia, arguing that "abscesses" of that nature would not heal themselves.³

According to much of the Russian and Western press, the seeds of the First Chechen War were sown in 1991 when the republic elected as president former Soviet Air Force General Dzhokar Dudayev. Within the next three years, argues BBC Russian Affairs Analyst Steven Eke, Chechnya degenerated into a mafia-style, quasi-independent territory that had become a center for trading in arms, drugs, and people.⁴ By 1994, the republic was not only considered a safe haven for criminals, but Chechens had gained a reputation within the former Soviet Union and Europe as among the most unified, violent, and effective of ethnic criminal groups. Their networks reached from the capital Grozny, to Moscow, and west through the Czech Republic, Austria, Germany, and Hungary. In Great Britain, it became known that the Chechen *mafija* had established a presence in London when a late February 1993 execution-style murder resulted in the death of two Chechen brothers who were being investigated by Scotland Yard for fraud. The brothers were later found to be working for the Chechen government looking for missiles to supply nationalist rebels in the Nagarno-Karabagh region. The Chechen arm also extended into the United States as they were reportedly active "enforcers" in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles.⁵

The New Muscovites

They first entered Moscow sometime from the early to mid-1980's⁶ for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the developed, industrialized, and urban areas of the Soviet Union were rife for the taking as there became a high demand for "goods and services." These included goods and services that were illegal (such as drugs), regulated (cigarettes or guns), or simply in short supply. When there is a plentiful supply of a legal, unregulated product, there is no incentive for a supplier. But in Soviet society, all of these were regulated, in short supply, and gangs were ready to fulfill the unmet demand for drugs, firearms, prostitutes, illegal casinos, alcohol, and so forth. Secondly, as immigrants, Chechens were on the bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder. As will be seen, most legitimate opportunities for advancement were closed to them, and when this occurs the next logical step is to turn to crime, specifically organized crime, to get ahead. Lastly, during the presidency of Mikhail Gorbachev (1985-1991), private enterprise, or cooperatives, were encouraged in the USSR. The more resourceful individuals and ethnic groups found a role they could exploit as there was much

money to be made in the political and economic upheaval that was taking place. As will be seen, the Chechens were exceptionally enterprising.⁷

Wearing merchant headscarves and leather jackets, the Chechens began setting up shop in hotels, car dealerships, and restaurants like the "Uzbekistan". The "Chechen *obshchina* (community)" had arrived, and the "Uzbekistan" soon became a rookery in the capital. Another word for *obshchina*, and one that Chechens like to use for their community, is *bratva* or brotherhood. As will be discussed later, the *bratva* was heavily influenced by Chechen social structures based on tight kinship and clans. It was at the "Uzbekistan" that three of the most infamous fathers of the Chechen Community started their business: Khozh-Akhmed Nukhaev;⁸ Nikolai Suleimanov, nicknamed "*Khoza*" (sparrow) or "Ruslan;" and their leader Movladi Atlangeriyev.⁹ Atlangeriyev would be kicked out of the UK in 2007 for plotting to murder fugitive tycoon Boris Berezovzky, and was then kidnapped in broad daylight outside a central Moscow restaurant in 2008 for allegedly cooperating with Russian law enforcement. The next May his body would be found buried in the Kurchaloyevskia area after the Chechen authorities received an anonymous tip.¹⁰

Suleimanov made a name for himself in the grand theft auto industry by establishing himself in Moscow's Southern Port where certain crooks from the Krapivin family taught him how to steal cars. It was quite an easy process. In that time a seller of second-hand cars was obligated to park in front of the government commissions office and pay the government part of the sale, but deception was simple. For instance, a Zhiguli would sell for 3000 rubles, but they would tell the commissions office that it sold for 300 rubles. The office confirms this so they can take a part of the 2700 rubles that were not reported. That's where Khoza came in, giving the seller so to speak a kick on the backside. With help from the commission office, he would take the car while it was parked in front of the office, and the Russian militia did not legally have grounds to say the car hijacking happened because the commission gave them a legal form saying it had been sold. Suleimanov brought into his circle his uncle and brothers in succession and supplanted himself in the port. By sheer violence, which the Chechens will become known for, he took control from the Azeris and Georgians, and the southern port, the most important car port in the Soviet Union at the time, became fully Chechen. He became the authority for all Chechens living in Moscow, and according to his partner Nukhaev, was very close to taking over the whole city.¹¹

While Suleimanov was taking control of the Southern Port's incoming cars, dealerships, and repair shops, other Chechens were taking over hotels and *beryoзка*, luxury supermarkets catering to foreigners and the elite. Soviet *apparatchiks*, or Communist Party functionaries, would use Chechen hotels to meet their mistresses or prostitutes, usually run by Chechens. In return, the Chechens would receive a variety of favors from blank passports to protection from prosecution. It was a tight-knitted community and the Chechen language was almost indecipherable to most Russians, leaving it impossible for authorities to penetrate. But most importantly, according to Alexei Soldatov the MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) official who ran the counter-Chechen unit, when the police got close to an arrest the group would close ranks, and the persons of interest would just leave for their homeland. Soldatov argued, "It was impossible to track them because there would always be somebody new from Grozny, participate in a job, and head back...Once they were down there we couldn't get them. We couldn't tell who was who."¹²

Cars and women helped the Chechens get a foothold into Moscow, but the most lucrative enterprise they were the first to cultivate and excel at was the technique of extortion, or what the Russians call a *krysha* (roof). As many fledgling businessmen, other gangs, and the Moscow police found out, the Chechens had found their niche. Khozh-Akhmed Nukhaev admitted that there were not many Chechens in Moscow at this time, but they were tight-knit, worked together, and well disciplined. The approach was simple. They would come to a business owner and ask who they paid for protection. If the answer was no one, then Nukhaev would reply, "Well you pay us. We are Chechens, we are cruel. We will come back tomorrow with a knife."¹³ It soon became clear to businessmen that being under the Chechens was a guarantee for help when help was needed; they were good partners and good protection. They did not need an army of men to get things done. It was good enough to have one Chechen, but when they gathered they were a force that many could not overcome. In an interview with *Forbes Russia* Editor Paul Klebnikov, whose 2004 murder is still unsolved, one anonymous Moscow police detective acknowledged, "The Chechens terrorized their competitors—their thirst for vengeance was frightening, their brutality awesome."¹⁴ Chechen competency in the protection racket was so overwhelming that at the dissolution of the Soviet Union, even the 5-7,000 Azerbaijani flower peddlers and fruit merchants in Moscow paid on average 500 rubles a day per cart.¹⁵

The only real concern of the extortionists was to not exceed the proper level of intimidation, as this could lead to the victim's death or an appeal to the police. This is what would lead to Suleimanov's eventual 1990 arrest. His Car Maintenance No. 7 dealership was known for its prestigious tailoring to the nouveau rich and their foreign cars. Suleimanov would use their personal information to find out the potential amount of money to extort from some of his clients, and he found an exceedingly wealthy one in a man named Balakirev, the director of a joint venture called Soyuz International. After being continually harassed, Balakirev went to the police and they set up a camera to record an episode of extortion involving 2.5 million rubles (unheard of for the time). After Balakirev had been taken to a suburban forest by Suleimanov and his associates to dig his own grave, the Moscow police recorded a conversation in which Suleimanov argued that no one really needs that much money, and those that do should give some of that away or bad things may happen. Balakirev agrees and Suleimanov ends with, "Right! Shrouds do not have pockets."¹⁶ Suleimanov was arrested for extortion and would get four years in an Arkanghelsk prison, but would be out in two with a reportedly 2 million ruble bribe. Not much is known about Khoza's early days, but after his release he went with his men to Chechnya in 1993, where he fought alongside mobster-politician and self-styled Chechen "Robin-Hood" Ruslan Labazanov against the republic's president, Dzhokhar Dudayev after the president overthrew the Chechen Parliament by force. There he was wounded in a Grozny shootout, taken into custody by Dudayev, and inexplicably released to return to Moscow. In December 1994, he was shot and killed outside his Car Maintenance No. 7 dealership by an alleged contract killer hired by the Russian *mafia*.¹⁷

By the early 1990's it was widely recognized that the Chechens were in Moscow to stay, and their trademark was overt violence.¹⁸ In numerous cases, there was a certain satisfaction held by Chechens as they became known as the most powerful and influential ethnic gangs in Moscow. Being acknowledged as wild, cruel, secretive, and singularly frightening had the effect that was needed to procure businesses in need of protection. As was also quickly found out by many businessmen in Moscow, the militia or the local police were either unequipped, unwilling, or part of the problem when others came looking for extortion money. Businessmen came to the realization that the Chechens were giving them the safety and security the police should have been giving them; in the eyes of many they had become

the police. This was that source of satisfaction. No one wanted the militia interfering with their affairs or other gangs fighting over a restaurant or an enterprise, so the Chechen's function was to control the criminal situation by preventing unrest and acts of vandalism. As one Chechen "businessman" told a western reporter, "We provide favorable conditions for development of business and the prosperity of businessmen in Moscow."¹⁹ Ten years after the creation of cooperatives in Russia, the facts were that being the best enforcer was a lucrative field. By this time, near ninety percent of all private enterprises and commercial banks in Moscow paid for a *krysha*. The amount of the roof ranged from 10-20 percent of turnover, which frequently came to over half of an enterprise's profits, and by this time Chechens were the main source of that protection.²⁰

After 1989, organized crime groups in Russia were divided into three categories: "classic," "governmental," and "national." "Classic" refers to the familiar structures known throughout the world as groups whose activities include: the drug trade, arms trade, smuggling, robbery, contract murder, and kidnapping. These groups consisted of, but were not limited to, the mostly ethnic Russian *Tambovskaya*, *Solntsevskaya*, and *Tul'skaya* groups, and the Armenian mafias. The "governmental" structures were comprised of MVD and FSB (Federal Security Services) cadres who were collectively known as the "police mafia." Included in this realm were also members of the many non-governmental security services who made money through corruption, security details, and extortion.²¹ The "national" groups quickly gained prominence at the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Soviet security services used a rudimentary method of law enforcement to deal with the classical syndicates. These syndicates were run by leaders known as *vory v zakone*, or "thieves-in-law," the Russian criminal organization created in the Soviet prison camps (gulags). The Soviet government, which will later be looked at as a mafia in its own right, tolerated the existence of a criminal elite of 20 to 30 persons who maintained authority by having certain powers, such as control over criminals in prison, delegated to them by the government. This way of doing things was effective because it gave the authorities some influence over the criminal world, while the "thieves" were useful in limiting the number of organized crime groups throughout the Soviet Union.²² But as the Soviet Union dissolved and Russia's market went through a shock (overnight) liberalization, the "thieves" were not ready to handle the new "national" groups that were coming into play; groups consisting

mainly of Georgians, Ukrainians, Tajiks, and Chechens. This in part helps explain the triumph of the Chechens over the entrenched ethnic Russian mafia. Not only were they disciplined, tight-knit, and violent when needed, but they also stormed into Moscow and the surrounding areas when the "classic" groups had lost much of their influence due to the decline of the Soviet government. No longer did the *Tambovskaya* or *Solntsevskaya* groups have the symbiotic relationship that gave government protection to these "connected" groups in exchange for limited control over mafia activities and expansion.²³

The idea of a Chechen takeover of Moscow began earlier in 1988, when the three main groups: *Tsentrlnaya* (Central), *Yuzhnyport* (Southern Port), and *Ostankinskaya* (the hotel Ostankino where they were based) came together. Soon unconcealed violence broke out. The first real battle came in August when the *Lyubertsy* gang (named after the Moscow oblast they controlled) failed to take over the restaurant "Uzbekistan." A response came in December when a group of around thirty of Khoza's men jumped a band of the *Baumann* group, an ally of *Lyubertsy*, in the restaurant "Labyrinth" on Kaliningrad prospect, resulting in many knife wounds, including four Baumann group leaders. In reply, the *Lyubertsy* went to the "*vory v zakone*," for help, and twelve group leaders met with Suleimanov and a few other Chechens in the cafe "Stork".²⁴ According to a Chechen report of the occurrence acquired by Russian journalist Mikolai Modestov, the following occurred: "The 'vory' had come to tell us who the real masters of Moscow were... Notwithstanding the numerical minority, we seized their weapons and attacked the thieves...The thieves were forced to retreat, and the police had not found a single witness."²⁵ During 1988-89, there were about twenty battles throughout Moscow. The fights consisted of forces numbering 20 to 80 fighters, many of whom were young Chechen men recruited from the various Moscow universities, and though there are no official numbers, at least 4 "*vory*" were killed and another 30 were wounded. There are no stats on Chechen losses, but losses of foot soldiers on both sides are estimated to be much higher than that.²⁶

The Great Mob War

Almost by default the Slav groups, especially *Solntsevskaya* and *Podolskaya* (a smaller, younger, but well-armed gang known for its ruthlessness, organization and discipline) became natural enemies of the Chechens. In 1991, under the guidance of one of

the most notorious and last “vory,” Vyacheslav “Yaponchik” Ivankov, *Yaponchik* meaning “Little Japanese” for his vaguely Asian features, a Mob War for territory commenced. The next couple of years saw intermittent violence between the groups. For example, in October 1990 a Georgian group opened fire on the Chechen cafe “Air,” 3 died (two Georgians) and 7 more Georgians were wounded. After the skirmish, almost 500 Chechens met at an automotive company pronouncing a death sentence on the leader of the Georgians. Volunteers of young fighters swore on the Koran and broke bread bringing down condemnation on the leader. The Moscow police offered a few million rubles as a reward for the possible arrest of any of the “community.” No matter the reward though, the war between the “vory” would continue and the Chechens were not immune to losses. In November, at a taxi stand two were shot and killed. The next month at the Hotel “Baikal,” one was murdered and two were wounded in a shootout. That January, in a shootout at the same hotel, a few more were wounded. Things came to a head in March 1991, when a clash in Moscow left 70 wounded and killed, including 20 Chechens killed. No matter the losses, according to Moscow head minister of safety in Moscow and Moscow Oblast Evgenii Sevastyanov, by 1992 the Chechen *obshchina* had become a “very large and influential” ethnic criminal group that was estimated at 400 active members, with perhaps another 1,300 foot soldiers. This compared to an estimated total of 300 Azerbaijanis, and 150 Armenians.²⁷

Despite the appearance of superiority in the capital, local and national police were making a few inroads. In 1989 alone, they arrested around 175 alleged Chechen *bratva* members. The numbers remained the same over the course of the next five years until the beginning of the First Chechen War. The big arrest was that of Suleimanov, and although he later “escaped,” and headed to Chechnya it showed that the Chechen *bratva* was not untouchable.²⁸

Regardless of the gang war that the Chechens had been fighting, the *bratva* had become too large to control. They began operating through proxies from other republics such as Georgians, Dagestani, Ingushetians, and even some Russian bands. Although the actual “war” began in 1991, a surge in violence and death in 1993 and 1994 would lead the Russian government and its federal forces to intervene. This new rash of violence began with Chechens and some “vory v zakone” aligned with them, pitted against a loosely termed Slavic alliance with *Solntsevskaya* and its allies. One of *Solntsevskaya*’s main allies was the

notorious, muscular, and violent chief enforcer, Sergey “Rambo” Timofeyev. The violence began with assassination of Valery “*Globus*,” Dlugach, the boss of the Chechen rival *Baumann* Group. The precise reason is unclear, but many believe he was playing a dangerous game between allying with Chechens or the Slavs. Either way, on the night of 10 April 1993 he went to a disco called *U’ Lis’sa*, half owned by *Solntsevskaya* and was shot by a sniper while getting into his Caprice. He was given an ostentatious funeral complete with black limos, huge wreaths, and a banquet at one of Moscow's priciest hotels.²⁹ Two days later, “Rambo” Timofeyev supposedly died in a car bomb, but there are rumors he faked his death to get away from the Chechens. The next day another key member of the group, Jewish mobster Viktor “The Kike” Kogan, was also murdered. The assassinations were not complete as nine months later the new head of *Baumann* group was also gunned down. The obliteration of *Baumann* group left *Solntsevskaya* an opportunity to gain a foothold and they moved in on Chechen protectorate, later Vladimir Putin benefactor-turned-enemy, and Russia’s first capitalistic car dealership, Boris Berezovsky’s *Logovaz*. On at least two occasions, *Logovaz* was assaulted by grenades, but Berezovsky refused to work with the police and *Solntsevskaya* failed to take the dealership.³⁰

Things had become so brazen that the Russian press began to compare Moscow with the era of Al Capone and the gang wars in 1930's Chicago. Men associated with either faction could be seen flaunting their success spending money at one of the many burgeoning casinos, driving expensive foreign cars, or sporting silk ties, double-breasted suits, and flashy jewelry. There were two differences however: firstly, in this war the factions had at their disposal not only pistols and automatic weapons, but also grenade launchers and heavy-infantry weapons. Secondly, civilians had not necessarily become targets, but their deaths had become an inevitable outcome of the turf war.³¹ Once one of the Soviet Union's safest cities, the murder rate in the capital in the first six months of 1993 was at 697 people, up sixty-one percent from the total of 432 murders committed the year before. Auto theft went up almost sixty-four percent, and burglaries around forty-four percent. Crime, however, was not just confined to a few "bad parts" of the capital. A British businessman was stabbed to death outside the front door of the expensive *Mezhdunarodnaya* Hotel. Another Swedish businessman was shot to death by three men who had burst into his apartment to steal cash and jewelry.³² Crime bosses and their families were not safe either. In April 1994, Georgian boss Avtandil

Chicklaidze and his wife were killed by gunmen who had burst into their apartment. A week earlier, infamous Georgian Otari Kvantrishvili was shot to death while leaving a public bath. Four men from the *Orekhovskaya* gang were convicted of the murder. This gang had been founded in 1988 by “Sylvester” Timofeyev, and would merge a year later with *Solntsevskaya* due to the Chechen threat.³³

The murder of Kvantrishvili actually helped the Chechens because the nominal leader and controller of the *obshchak* (see below) “Musa Starshii,” was in Chechnya hiding for the 1993 shooting of Kvantrishvili’s brother and 21st Century Association boss, Amiran Kvantrishvili. Once Otari was murdered, “Musa” came back to Moscow and began running the *obshchak* again. The *obshchak* was a uniquely Chechen idea, and can be best described as a united financial source. All three gangs maintained a single fund for their pooled criminal resources. The money from this pool was used for paying lawyers, bribing officials, and supporting comrades and their families while they served prison sentences. Links with officials went from allegedly the lowest city official to the national government. They were also thought to maintain close contacts with the Moscow Regional Department of Organized Crime (RUOP) and the Moscow Department of the FSK (formerly the KGB). The three Chechen gangs also had a shared intelligence and security department headed by Akhmet M. and Musa Starshii’s brother, “Vakha Mladshii.” The department dealt with gathering information on the ground and from corrupt officials on possible operations against the gangs, and to keep abreast of their competitor’s activities. In spite of a bloody gang war, the Chechen *obshchina* had become a tightly ran machine.³⁴

Two other lucrative fields for the Chechens were drugs (will be discussed later) and a fake money printing business known as the Aviso or “Chechen Memo” scam. In essence, Chechens began receiving money from the Russian Central Bank under fictional bank warrants. Due to the lack of a comprehensive banking system at the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a telegram with password was sufficient to transfer funds. In Moscow, non-cash transfers could be moving from one bank to another for weeks or even months, while inter-city transfers could last even longer. In 1991-92, there were several banking crises where for months at a time money could not go from bank to bank. To prevent a complete breakdown of the economy, the Central Bank of Russia made the following rule: to transfer funds to the accounts of firms the receiving bank had to provide a bank order (aviso) that was drawn up

and signed in accordance with the sending bank. The sending bank was assumed to have money deducted from its coffers. In Chechnya, some aviso stationery was stolen, while signatures and seals were forged. Taking advantage of the confusion there were a few months when one could receive money under non-existing orders. A few journalists argued it should not have been called Chechen, but rather the Moscow aviso, since the cash had been withdrawn from the Moscow State Bank. But the "business" itself was quickly brought under control of the Chechens, in particular allegedly, by future Russian Presidential candidate and Chechen Republic Deputy Chairman of Foreign Affairs, Umar Dzhabrailov. However, in interviews Dzhabrailov vehemently denied his involvement. In 1997, he said to the correspondent of *Agumnty i Fakty* that the aviso had not been created by Chechens, but by those who had been in the top of the banking system. He declared he did not receive a penny that way, but rather that the money for seed capital had been earned legally through loans.³⁵

In the grand scheme, Dzhabrailov's guilt or innocence is secondary to the estimated billions of dollars that were siphoned (much like oil) out of Russian State Banks. In one case alone in 1992, Chechens were arrested by the MVD and found with \$350 million worth of fake promissory notes. Four employees of the State Bank were arrested for supplying the notes for a cut of the profit. In another such caper, a staggering \$700 million was removed from a bank and the profits could be seen driving around Grozny the next week in the form of new Mercedes, BMW's and Cadillacs.³⁶

Yeltsin's Reaction

Murders, bombings, kidnappings, and gun battles had become common place in many of Russia's large cities. It had become apparent that the police and the government were not prepared for the sophistication and absolute violence that ensued with the breakup of the Soviet Union. In a 1992 survey, three out of four Muscovites said they were afraid to walk the streets at night. A year later a poll found that almost fifty percent of Russians rated crime higher on their list of worries than unemployment.³⁷ In 1992 alone, there were 10-12 million crimes in Russia, with 352,000 people killed or maimed, figures comparable with war casualties. That same year, out of fifty cases of organized crime that were uncovered, only four were prosecuted. The Russian government realized that something had to be done. What started as an anti-crime and corruption campaign for Yeltsin quickly turned into a not-so-

subtle press and police crusade investigating crimes committed by non-Russian nationalities; in particular, groups from the Caucasus (Azerbaijanis) and the North Caucasus (Chechens). Yeltsin even went as far as to call it a civil war and a government press release argued, "the leaders of ethnic criminal groups buy in Moscow not only apartments and cars, but also...civil servants and power."³⁸

Many citizens and politicians began asking for something to be done about the "criminal revolution." It was "criminal" in the sense that it did not recognize the authority vested in elected officials, the state or its law enforcement instruments. It was a "revolution" because it brought about a new economic order, a Russian post-communist order that was neither a command economy nor a real free market.³⁹ The statistics for the rise in criminality from 1993 to 1994 are good indicators as to why Yeltsin began to take a tough stance on lawbreakers. A final MVD report exposed 5809 organized groups (up 52 percent from 1993), while Moscow detectives registered 19,000 official arrests in 1994 (up 56 percent). From these arrests came 13,808 units of firearms (18 percent), money and valuables equaling \$171 million rubles, foreign currency estimated at \$31.5 million, and almost 4 tons of drugs. The year in total produced 253 murders, 116 cases of *banditizm*, 1436 cases of extortion, 63 kidnappings of regular citizens, and 1407 abductions of people tied to criminal groups.⁴⁰

Added to this was Ultra-Nationalist/National Socialist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's strong showing in the 1993 Parliamentary elections because of his stance on toughening up on crime, and Yeltsin launched an operation to strike at the heart of the underworld. On 16 March 1994, an MVD operation commenced called "Operation El'Brus," named for the highest mountain in the North Caucasus and Russia. Police officers found caches of illegal products from drugs to explosives to arms. According to an anonymous MVD officer, one cache contained an AK-47 with a bayonet and a magazine with bullets, F-1 grenades, a .22 caliber rifle, 38 rounds of ammunition for it, 800 rounds of 7.62 for a RPK machine gun, automatic shotguns, 32 rounds for a Makarov pistol, and numerous 12-gauge shotguns.⁴¹

Of the 10,000 people arrested and detained in Moscow eighty-percent were from the Caucasus, mostly Azerbaijanis, Georgians and Chechens. The press's main focus was on those who were not ethnic Russians, and in interviews people ranged from excited to disgusted that the Russian newspapers would even worry about writing about the arrest of foreign criminals in their city. One anonymous Muscovite argued, "I was raised on a spirit of

internationalism. But these guys, Azerbaijanis and Chechens with their outrageous behavior, their wild laughter and their malicious, ugly mugs have literally overrun the country.”⁴²

The operation, mixed with the death of Suleimanov, and the oncoming war in Chechnya that saw many of the *obshchina* leave Russia to fight, met with success. But Yeltsin did not stop there. Three months later, on 15 June, he signed a decree that granted law-enforcement agencies sweeping powers of search and detention for up to thirty days. Not surprisingly, the reaction to the decree in the parliament was largely negative, with only the Centrist Democratic Party of Russia and the Ultra-Nationalist party of Zhirinovky supporting it.⁴³ Six months after that decree, Russian Forces invaded the Republic of Chechnya, a republic one Western observer called, "a bandit state, a thieves' kitchen, the habitat of the drug smugglers, criminals, and hijackers and the home of crime syndicates and mafia groups that operated in Moscow and other major Russian cities across the Russian Federation.”⁴⁴

Questions Answered

This piece will go into full detail as to why in Russia proper, and law agencies around the world, the word Chechen became tantamount to being called a criminal. Not only this, in many circles of Chechen society, there was, and is, pride taken in the idea that they are known for being good criminals because in some ways their society has always valued being able to get away from the authorities. It will look into how a republic of only 1 million people at its height could so completely take hold of the Russian imagination, and why it is viewed that writing about Chechens in Russia is like writing about the mafia in Sicily: there cannot be one without the other. Or as Russian criminologist Andrei Konstantinov calls it, their "mystical, mythical aura.”⁴⁵ At the same time, it was not just a case of being well-known to the general public and law enforcement, but also being recognized as the most structured and lethal brand name in the underworld: one that other gangs would try to franchise. A group of individuals so distinguished that even the Sicilian Cosa Nostra were in awe of them. As one anonymous member recalled, "Where we would first threaten, the Russians would kill him. But the Chechens would kill his whole family too.”⁴⁶

There has been considerable scholarship about the secession movement in the republic that has seen two wars since the breakup of the Soviet Union. Much of it has centered on the idea that Russia went to war to keep its territorial integrity intact making sure that a domino effect did not occur in which other small, ethnically diverse republics followed Chechnya's lead. That argument is valid and correct, but there is another dimension to it, and that is before, and immediately after, the first invasion of Chechnya in 1994 the Russian government's rhetoric was that of cleaning up the republic's criminalization because it was affecting the larger Russian Federation as a whole. This argument is not a smoking gun, however it is a serious part of the history between Russia and Chechnya and cannot be overlooked. What can also not be overlooked is that the Russian description of the Chechens as fierce bandits, and deadly thieves and criminals, began from the first serious contact with each other in the seventeenth century. From first interaction, the history and relationship between the two people has been messy, and the place remains so today. Because of this, there are many different historical, social, and religious levels to the history and romanticization of criminality in Chechnya, but they are connected and when they are put together they make a whole. Likewise, it will look into how and why the Chechens have excelled at criminal activities throughout its history. It will look into how the Russians and Soviets helped reinforce their legacy as such, how the religion of Islam helped develop many "illegal" traditions during Soviet times, how the Chechen *bratva* took over Moscow and other regions of the Russian Federation after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and whether they deserve to be called one of "the most brutal gangs on earth."⁴⁷

The first chapter will deal with the historical importance of what is known as an *abrek* or *abrechestvo*, a "bandit of honor." An *abrek* is not an ordinary criminal in that he is looked upon as a folkloric hero who takes from the rich and gives to the poor, and fights outsiders when they come to Chechnya to conquer. He is a criminal, but a criminal for and of the people, and something that society takes pride in and will shelter in times of trouble. Chechen society is also organized around *teips* or clans. As was seen in the turf war before the Russian invasion, these clans can combine and move fluidly when faced with a common enemy. The *teip* is also a form of social responsibility. Chechens have a customary law called *adat* that interweaves a respect for elders, hospitality for guests, codes of honor, and the blood feud or the Chechens version of eye-for-an-eye. These codes of honor, along with the harsh

mountainous terrain and legendary horsemanship, created an idealistic version of the people expounded by such Russian authors as Pushkin and Tolstoy. Since that time, in Russian imagination's, Chechens have been looked at as a rugged, aggressive, weapon-yielding, law-breaking, yet romantic people.

Chechnya is a Muslim republic, and Chapter Two will look into how the religion is not only an important ethnic identity, but much like *teips*, it mobilized and unified the people when there was external pressure from the Russians or Soviets. Chechens are Sunni Muslims, and as will be discussed, what took hold in the Republic was a unique blend of mysticism and Islam that is called Sufism. Out of Sufism were created two semi-secret, organized Islamic Brotherhoods (*bratvas*) called the Naqshbandi and Qadiriya, each emphasizing their own versions of hierarchy and iron discipline, much like any well-functioning organized criminal syndicate today. Islam will help structure society after Russia's first invasion in the mid-19th century, and will also be a rallying point for anti-Russian sentiments thereafter; a sense of us-versus-them that will not wither as time progresses.

Chapter three will deal with the beginning of the Soviet period, the state's attempts to deal with the nationalities they inherited, and the important 1944 deportation of the Chechen people to Central Asia. It will discuss the outcomes of forced collectivization, and how that turned many young Chechen men into the infamous *bezprizornik*, or homeless boys and criminals. From there, the Stalinist era will be examined, including Chechen involvement for both sides in World War II and their subsequent deportation to Central Asia. In the near-uninhabitable areas and the gulags (Soviet work prisons) the Chechens were sent to, they quickly made a name for themselves as fierce, independent, and disciplined.

Chapter four will deal with the Chechens return home from exile, and the situation that occurred once they arrived. During the remainder of the Soviet Period, Islam will also make them enemies of the state, and will force the Brotherhoods to go underground and function throughout the period as illegal groups. The Soviets had come up with their own "official" version of Islam, and the Chechens came up with their own "parallel" version during the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years, and will lead into the post-Soviet period in the region.

Chapter five will encompass the time period from the dissolution of the Soviet Union into the end of the First Chechen War. It will argue that one of the main reasons for the war was the criminality that enveloped the fledgling Republic. Ethnic separatism and keeping

Chechnya in the Federation so other ethnic Republics would follow suit was also a motive for the Russian invasion. But much of the rhetoric from Russian officials and military men focused exclusively on the fact that the Chechen *bratva* was gaining legitimacy and spreading throughout the Federation, while the Republic itself had become a haven for criminals throughout the world.

In the interregnum of the two wars, discussed in Chapter six, situations presented themselves that caused many Chechens, Russians, and the world to question what was happening in the republic. Grozny and surrounding areas, or what was left of them after the Russian bombardment, became criminal free zones once again. There was ample evidence that countries, groups, and individuals from the Middle East were supplying the Islamic Chechens with drugs, weapons, and recruits. The republic also saw a fight for power begin between different Islamic factions resulting in kidnappings, terrorist acts, and civilian deaths as an overall sense of recklessness pervaded society. The hostilities flowed into neighboring republics and Russia proper, and Russian forces once again invaded Chechnya. The difference from the first war though, is that the Russian military were not fighting ethno-national separatists, but rather a syndicate of criminals, Islamists, foreign mercenaries, and an assortment of other unpleasant characters.

Lastly, Chapter seven will look into the Second Chechen War and the regime put into power by the Russians to stem the flow of illegality in the Republic, headed by the Kadyrov family. The link between the state, organized and transnational crime, and terror in the Republic will also be examined. This is sometimes referred to as the crime-terror continuum, or "The Unholy Trinity."⁴⁸ As an Islamic republic prone to violence, stationed on the periphery of the Russian Federation, Chechnya became a breeding ground of Islamism as many recruits from the Middle East and Afghanistan came to train and fight the Russian forces. While many of the groups fighting Russia were Islamists, numerous Chechens turned to the Russians for help or began fighting both the Islamists and the Russians. In 2003, a Russian-backed government headed by Akhmad Kadyrov was put in power, and he and son created their own criminal fiefdom out of the Republic while fighting extremists. Once the Kadyrov's were put in power, an immediate clan-based, criminal, power struggle ensued that continues as a low-intensity war into today.

Chapter 2: The Honorable *Banditz*

The North Caucasus, as the Russians knew it, was a periphery of the empire until Alexander Pushkin's 1822 narrative poem, "The Captive of the Caucasus." Pushkin, along with his protégé Nikolai Gogol, had taken a tour of the area with the Russian Army. Pushkin had gotten sick and was advised to spend two weeks in the mountains hiking and drinking its waters to recover. After the successful convalescence, the above was written. The soldier was taken captive by Chechens, a normal occurrence, and soon falls in love with a Chechen girl. In one stanza, he looks down from atop one of the peaks, and before him is the majesty of Mount Elbrus (the highest mountain in Europe), eagles flying free, and thunderbolts below. Although the prisoner is untouched by the storm under him, "He heard the lightning's feeble fury/And somehow joy within him burned."¹ Until the poem existed, there were no stories or narratives for the region, or "the Caucasus," as it was to become known. Soon after the publication of the Byronic poem, Chechnya took hold in the Russian imagination, and it became, "a cherished land not only of wide, expansive freedom, but of inexhaustible poetry, the country of boiling life and bold dreams!"²

After Pushkin, the romantic notion of the Caucasus continue in Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*. In 1837, Lermontov was exiled to the Caucasus for accusing the high pillars of Russian society for their complicity in the murder of Alexander Pushkin, who was fatally wounded in a duel. The Tsar had him arrested and sent to the mountains. *A Hero of Our Time* is a semi-autobiographic tale of Pechorin, a bored, adventure-seeking, anti-hero noble. Like Pushkin, Lermontov also wrote of beautiful scenery and women, and duels and blood feuds, in a place that even the almighty Tsar could not tame. But in a discussion between two Russian officers, Lermontov gives a hint of how this romanticism will later turn into fear, laced with antagonism. The two are talking about the Chechens when one says, "They don't seem to know when they ought to die--indeed these villains can hardly ever be killed. They are a people without the slightest idea of propriety."³

Thirty Five years later, at the age of twenty-four, Leo Tolstoy wrote the novella *Prisoner in the Caucasus*. Like Pushkin and Lermontov, it was based on personal experience in the area, and much like Pushkin's earlier work, a Russian officer, Zhilin, is kidnapped during a daring raid, and would later be set free by Dina, the captor's beautiful daughter. Even though he wrongly calls Chechens "Tartars," what Tolstoy enhances to the earlier works

is that the region's inhabitants are Muslims, daring fighters, excellent horseman, yet hospitable at the same time. The description of Zhilin's captors will come to epitomize the perception of the Chechen people: well-armed, expert kidnappers, and horsemen. Soon after capture, Zhilin is put into a barn, and his two main kidnappers appear. One is dark and quick with a dagger in his belt, the other is a richly dressed, red-bearded, muscular man. The latter enters first and, "stood leaning against the doorpost, playing with his dagger and glaring askance at Zhilin, *like a wolf* (italics added)." ⁴ This is an apt simile as the wolf would not only become the national animal, but also the embodiment of what a true Chechen is. A wolf is free, brave, and fierce. It is an animal that runs in packs, or *tieps* (clans) in Chechen, where all are equal, and even when it is outmatched in a fight, there is still a chance it will emerge victorious due to its alertness, intelligence, and daring. The wolf answers only to its pack and is enslaved by no one, as the national anthem relates, "We were born at night when the she-wolf whelped/In the morning, to lion's deafening roar were we named...Never will we submit and become slaves/*Death or freedom*, for us there's only one way (italics added)." ⁵ Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the Chechen *abrek*.

The "Abrechestvo"

There are sagas throughout the Caucasus known as the "*Nart*," mythical tales of a larger-than-life race living before the time of men. The word *Nart* comes from the Iranian word *nar*, meaning hero. In all the stories there are *Narts* and *orhustoytami*, or good versus evil. Through the oral traditions, the *narts* are knights, protectors of the weak, and in constant battle against the treacherous and envious *orhustoytami*. Though they are heroes, many of these wanderers were half-feared, half-admired outlaws travelling through the wild mountain terrain stealing and killing. There are many such stories, and a main Chechen and Ingush champion was Seska Solsa. In one tale, Solsa and his cohorts decide to steal the sheep of a spiritual and peaceful farmer named Gorzhay. Instead of taking the livestock in the night, Solsa calls out Gorzhay to have an open battle with him. Gorzhay agrees to this and loses the battle and his sheep. But since Solsa gave the shepherd the option to defend himself and acquired the goods in a fair, open battle it was an honorable extraction known as "white booty." It was not an ordinary robbery, but rather a moral, praiseworthy act, consistent with the ideals of society at the time. ⁶

Along with accepted thieving, Chechen life was, and is, built around blood-relatives and *teip* (clan) relations. In time of defense against the Russians the *teips* formed into thirteen larger groups, or *tukhums*. In the nineteenth-century, there were 135 *teips* that were further subdivided into smaller *gars* (branches) and *gars* into *nekye* (patronymic families). A *teip* is a military-economic alliance determined by groups, not necessarily connected by blood, but united for joint solutions and communal tasks of defending against attacks and economic exchange. *Teips* are confined to certain territories, but in times of peace were supposed to equally share the hunting lands, livestock, and arable farmland. The emergence of alliances within the *teips* in the nineteenth-century began the process of the area becoming a semi-nation with local divisions. When the need arose, meetings of the *teips*, much like meetings of criminal dons, were attended by elders or representatives, and all the rights and customs of the area where the meeting was held were honored. The meetings were necessary for situations that occurred on a communal level, including, inner-*teip* debates, problems or disagreements that arose between differing families, for the communal defense of isolated *teips* in need, or to gather into *tukhums* when the whole area required defending. This *teip* council made decisions that affected individuals as well as declared war or peace, and in the end the true identity of any Chechen runs through the *teip*.⁷

In addition, there were at least twenty-three principles that structured society to guarantee the rule of "truth." These rules or guidelines were known as *adat*, which can be translated as "usual," or "the truth." The five basic principles covered the following: unity and unshakeable *teip* relations, laws encasing the dealings between landowners, the council of elders meeting, the selection of a war leader known as *Bayatcha*, and lastly the declaration of a blood feud. The commander could order anything in time of impending war, but his power was only expressed during times of fighting. This was considered a war democracy in that the election of a war-commander emphasized the Chechen ideal of equality, and also required a high level of organization and discipline between the different *teips*. Choosing a commander for war was important, but perhaps the most significant principle in Chechen life was the blood feud. Much like a vendetta, the feud could be called for the murder or public discrediting of a member of a differing *teip*. In agreement with the custom, the relative of the murdered could either murder that person or anyone of his family, and since this was not subject to legal examination it could go on for as long as time required. In a combative,

democratic, decentralized society based on customary rather than governmental law, there was a need for societal oversight and the blood feud was the Chechen version of that, "the *teip* was the fortress of *adat*."⁸

The idea of blood revenge was to deter the first blow, and was one main reason why seldom was there large-scale battles in the loosely-governed, but tight-knit communities. There was a story of Amkhad Abayev, who died in 1990 at the age of one-hundred, and had fought a vendetta that lasted seventy years. In the early part of the century, his elder brother Akhma was driving cattle along a road between the villages of Gekhi and Roshni-Chu. A raucous wedding party on horses passed him, and one of the horsemen struck the *papakha* (fur hat) from Akhma's head – a great insult. Akhma turned and hit him in the back, whereupon the other man turned his horse around, drew his dagger and stabbed Akhma in the back. Akhma lived, and the village elders ruled that the two blows had cancelled each other out. However, Akhma was murdered 20 years later in another feud, but his brother still held vengeance for the first attacker, Akhmed Bazayev. In 1928, Amkhad found Bazayev and slashed him across the back with a *kinzhal*, an eye-for-an-eye. The feud resumed with smaller incidents until the autumn of 1975 when Amkhad and his son Alvi, who tells the story, were cutting hay and he saw Bazayev in the next orchard. He called out to him 3 times before he came over and finally ended the feud, saying, "I don't know how long we'll both live, we're both old men now, let's make it up."⁹

In the martial society, young men grew up trying to gain position in their village through noble acts of valor. The boys grew up learning to fight, ride, and raid to show their true worth. The especially skillful would earn the high honor of *dzhigit*, a Turkic word describing a skillful, brave equestrian, or a brave person in general.¹⁰ Historically, a Chechen's formal costume, whether a *dzhigit* or a simple farmer, would have consisted of at least one set of arms, and some would even include a chain-mail shirt or plated armor. The weapons of choice included guns, pistols, fuse-type rifles, sabers, spears, and a dagger especially well-known in the North Caucasus as a *kinzhal*. Not only were most men armed, but it was a matter of pride to keep weapons in good order. Foreign researcher-traveler Yakob Raynegs, who visited at the end of the eighteenth-century, wrote, "That only the people of the North Caucasus had such well-maintained shields and weaponry."¹¹

Although the blood feud kept large-scale fighting from occurring, it did not eradicate crime altogether. A social group formed outside of the law, in contrast with the rest of society, and they were known as *abreks*. The etymology of the word may come from the Avar word *Aragak*, meaning tramp, drifter, or burglar, but it has also been translated as "sworn enemy." The main reason for becoming a drifter or outcast (*izgoy*) was exile from the clan by a prince or other prominent figure due to a blood feud or the committing of a crime that neither he nor his clansmen could compensate for. It could also have been a choice in the search for glory, or to gain riches through robbing or kidnapping for ransom. No matter the reason, all three were time-honored traditions and once a person became an *abrek*, they were fugitives for life; but depending on the time and social situation, the term had different connotations. For example, from the sixteenth to eighteenth-century they were commonly known as outcasts of society, but once the Russians came into the area they gained a reputation that overcame the negative implication of being a mere bandit. Rather, they became a sort of folk-hero fighting the good fight against intruding outsiders. They were such quick studies that they quickly earned a reputation amongst the Russian military of, "daring mountaineers (*gortsi*), who take a quick vow or pledge to not spare himself and to fight frantically."¹²

There are three main characteristics that gave the *abrek* a distinctly North Caucasian identity that allowed them to transcend being a pure bandit. Firstly, he was misunderstood by his society, and that is why he chose to leave it in search for truth. This blended with the second characteristic in that rarely did heroism, especially in the Chechen context, take place outside of loneliness and despair. He was a lone wolf, and like a wolf he had a brave heart. Even though he was not as strong as a lion or an eagle, a wolf would go into battle no matter the odds. It may have been a helpless endeavor, but he did it anyway because in the fight either he defeated his enemy or he was defeated in an unequal battle, and ultimate victory was being prepared to die. Lastly, he was a hero and an outsider, existing on the border between life and death, and right and wrong. This is his "liminal nature," and what made the *abrek* legendary, more than a mere human.¹³

This can be seen in the many Chechen songs and poems that are dedicated to the *abreks*. They are dramas of the *abrek's* life, filled with the strain of living on the fringes of

society, while making the conscience decision to live a life of banditry and violence. One such poem goes:

"When the land on my grave dries up, forget me my dear mother/The cemetery is overgrown with grass and the grass stifles my grief, my old father/Older brother, do not wait long to avenge my death/Do not forget me my young brother, because soon you will be lying in the graveyard with me."¹⁴

The romantic views of the *abreks* did not change the fact that it was not always a good thing to meet up with one as many of them were nothing more than killers and thieves. Russian General and Caucasian War veteran V.A. Potto describes an encounter with a band of *abreks* while transporting some Russian citizens between villages. He describes them as wearing silky white wool while riding their horses expertly, and underneath their hats they had bloody, cloudless stares. They had well-maintained and expensive rifles, no doubt stolen from some other unlucky traveler, and the quintessential weapon for the bandits at the time, the *kinzhal*. The attack of the *abreks* proved to be unsuccessful, but the physical and psychological strain wore on the victims. Children, women, the infirm, and an old man were all equally attacked, and a few lost their lives in the battle. Potto writes that while all this was happening, the bandits looked a person in the face to see the fear in their eyes. He added, "No such words express meaning for a person who rips open the bonds of friendship, bloodies the people, and refuses love, honor, conscience, compassion. In a word: all the feelings which keep a person from being a wild animal. And *abreks* truly have the very awful beastly spirit that is dangerous and foreign to many: that is for blood – and his natural force is his blade."¹⁵

One of the first Chechen historiographers, Y Laidae, argued that it was the mid-eighteenth century when *abreks* began to turn from social outcasts into dangerous bands. They stopped respecting the customs of their fathers, executing the words of *adat*, and thus in Chechnya there became only one law: the law of strength. *Abreks* were not afraid of the social structures of clans and families, including retribution through blood feuds, and criminality came to be famous. They started killing and slaughtering each other without a thought, and finally, started to commit crimes that up to that point had been unprecedented. That is they began to kill, steal from, and kidnap defenseless people, many of whom they sold to foreigners as slaves.¹⁶ By the end of the eighteenth century, Chechnya had become known by many in the Russian military and government as a "Robber Republic." The shift of power to the outlaws had made the raiding system a legitimate form of society, and that ruined the

basic form of society and life for everyday people. In the eyes of many, including Frederick Engels, it had become a “vile system of thieves, violence, deviousness and treason.”¹⁷ The continuous fighting shifted from raiding outside Chechnya-proper, to squabbles for land, livestock, and pastures; things that would make an *abrek's* position in society more favorable. Roaming in groups became safer than doing things alone, and bands throughout the area began to form so that at the beginning of the nineteenth century there were counted over 200 clans of robbers in Chechnya.¹⁸

The Russians Bring War

The desire to reach warm seas caused the Russian Empire to come through the North Caucasus as early as the mid-sixteenth century. During that time, Ivan the Terrible's reign, there were reports of an isolated, clannish, pagan society in what would become known as Chechnya. For the next century and a half, the region disappeared from geo-politics as Russia became interested in Europe as the Ottomans began to decline, and then began a religious fight for supremacy, Islam gained control of the area and the Cossacks began to move in with assistance from the Catherine the Great. At the end of the eighteenth century, an Islamic warrior named Sheikh Mansur (discussed in Chapter Two) annihilated Catherine's army at the Sunzha River. After Russia remained mostly absent from the area with outposts stationed sporadically throughout. It was then that the Chechens, *abreks* especially, began to harass the Russian lines and gain the reputation as a region of fighters and thieves. As General Alexei Ermolov, the infamous founder of Grozny (fortress), wrote in 1825, “Fear and greed are the two mainsprings of everything that takes place here. These people’s only policy is force.”¹⁹

The Russians knew they needed help pacifying the North Caucasus, and to that end the Terek and Greben River Cossacks were employed. There is a popular Greben Cossack story of the era that deals with the relationship between the Russians and Cossacks on one side, and the Chechens on the other. It helps explain the origin of enmity, and gives a view into how Chechen day-to-day life was viewed by the foreign inhabitants. In the early days, after the Cossacks settled on the Russian west bank of the Terek River, a specialization of economic functions developed between the two. The Chechens continued to live off of plunder, attacking villages and travelers as they always had, but now they exchanged booty with the Cossacks. In the story, a rich Cossack named Batyrev sold the goods in Astrakhan for a nice

profit. In one exchange, he received a gun that he kept instead of trading like he always had done. The original owner, a Chechen, saw the gun he tried to buy it back, but Batyrev refused and kept it as a keepsake. Sometime later Batyrev and his brother were attacked by same the Chechen and his comrades, his gun was stolen, and all the Batyrevs killed. Thus began, so the story goes, the centuries of hatred, raiding, and killing between the two peoples along the Terek. This is a prevalent type of story in the North Caucasus—a thriving bandit pursuit falling out over stolen goods, violence, and then vendetta.²⁰

At the turn of the eighteenth century a few anti-Russian movements sprang up, and none more (in) famous than that of Bey-Bulat Taymiev. Bey-Bulat was an *abrek*, and it is important to note this because his movement gained momentum, and a new crusade began. This is the beginning, according to North Caucasian scholar and eye-witness Sergei Berdiaev, of the correlation between anti-Russian movements and *abreks*. They were still criminals stealing livestock, robbing trains, exacting revenge for murders, insults, or protecting the honor of women and kin, but they had also begun molding into criminals declaring their own authority and committing crimes specifically against Russian law and intrusion. Berdiaev argues it was hereditary, it was a natural evolution of things, and the Russian forces had to begin to deal with men who were, “lurking in the mist searching for justice.”²¹

Bey-Bulat was a good example of this development. In 1802, he began an uprising against the Greben Cossacks, and immediately Russian authorities targeted him as a man who was seriously challenging the Tsar. In the upcoming decade, his successful raids gained him the reputation as a fighter against imperialism. So much so, that in 1807 the Russians offered him 250 rubles to fight for them, he declined and began to expand his partisan fight. In 1810, with an estimated 100 warriors, he attacked a Russian outpost in the Terek region where he was caught and forced into captivity. A few weeks later he miraculously escaped (a recurring theme in *abrek* history), and in turn kidnapped the local mayor for ransom and became a local cult hero. Russian authorities did not look kindly on this type of behavior. Russian Colonel Grekov, who was stationed in the area, argued that men like Bey-Bulat did not fully comprehend what they were doing to society. Rather than looked on as heroes, the raiders should have been looked on as villains and troublemakers who did not comprehend the destruction they left in their wake. He looked at it in economic terms: while the people looked up to the robbers, what really occurred was society being robbed and pillaged by the

men who lived off of crime. Grekov wrote, “These crooks are under the delusion that we cannot fight them...and what’s more they get in such a frenzy they do not catch sight of their delusional destruction of the area. They open the way for murderers and thieves, and one such robber is Bey-Bulat.”²²

For the next seventeen years, Bey-Bulat avoided capture and the admiration for the *abrek* in Chechen society was at its peak. In March of 1829, Russian forces had had enough. In a report to General Ermolov, General Giorgii Emanuel wrote the bandit had become too popular, and it was necessary to lower him into submission. But it would not be an easy task as, “he is close with the people, and they do not like authority...we need to reassure them that we will send him into oblivion if he does not repent, submit, and diligently make up for his former deeds.”²³ Later that year, in discussions with the Russian authorities, Bey-Bulat was pardoned for his time as a robber and a thief, and became a citizen of the Russian Empire. This was a big blow to the partisan fight against the Tsar. Three years later, he was killed in what appeared to be a blood feud, although some believe he was secretly working against the Tsar’s forces again and secret agents of the Tsar executed him.²⁴

Well before Bey-Bulat’s surrender and death, the Russian military was having a tough time settling the Caucasian Line. In a March 1811 report to the Head Commander Evgenii Repina in Georgia, Colonel Alexander Tormasov refers to the *abreks* from Chechnya and Dagestan as “huntsmen.” The Sheikh Ali-Khan had two companies made up of 17 huntsmen each moving through the Kuban province, which was an important convoy for the military to get their goods. Tormasov begs for help arguing that not only are the bandits running free in between Kuban and Derbent, but also that their hit-and-run formations are confusing and he cannot figure out a way to stop them.²⁵ That same day Repina received a letter from another commander stationed elsewhere in the Kuban asking for help as another attack by *abreks*, this time under Surkhan-Khan, had cut communication and supply lines.²⁶ A little under a year later, and with the help of the local populace, Chechen Sheikh Ali Khan and his bandits had made large inroads in the Kuban region. A colonel in the area reported that the local inhabitants were not satisfied with how the Russians had come in and treated them, and that there was no way to persuade them otherwise. The mutinous Ali-Khan attacked them on the 6th and 22nd of November, and with the help of the people he vanished. The colonel ends his letter with the thought that the Sheikh and *abrek*, “shows no respect for our power.”²⁷

In 1816, after victories in territorial disputes against the Persian and Ottoman Empires, the Russians began to move much of its military into the Caucasus and set up a military administration. The man they put in charge was General Alexei Ermolov. The North Caucasus had become a geopolitically significant *raion* (district) on the Russian frontier as they stood in the way of the Black and Caspian Seas, and the Transcaucasian Republics of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. At that point, a few mountain *raions* along the Kuban and Terek rivers had been annexed by Russia, but most of the area was still independent of Russia and if they were not connected to the Russian Empire than there would be no link to Transcaucasia to the south. The North Caucasus were a barrier to the warm water ports, and the Russian government was not able to further successfully realize their foreign-policy in Transcaucasia without fortifying the North. Upon arriving in the area, Ermolov immediately pursued the harsh policies set down by the tsar. In an 1818 report to Tsar Alexander I, he describes the difficulties that it would take to defeat the mountaineers of the North Caucasus, but he pays special attention to the Chechens whom he refers to as “trash,” the most dangerous of all the mountaineers, an “animal people,” and “Russian skull collectors.”²⁸

The General brought with him the idea of using overwhelming force and punitive raids to quell the mountaineers. His plan was the systematic and gradual passification of Chechnya and Dagestan, and once he had those two areas under Russian control the rest of the North Caucasus people would fall in line. To realize this end, he began building a large, complex war structure with roads and fortifications, along with a fortress he named *Grozny*, or fearsome or redoubtable in Russian.²⁹ The naming of the fort was a symbol that went with the polemics and discussions many were having about the mountain peoples in Russia at the time. Tsar Alexander’s successor, Nicholas I referred to the Caucasus as a “den of thieves,” (*razboinich’i vertepi*), while the well-known Russian poet Pavel Katenin likened the area to a “bandits hideout (*priton razboinikov*), where thieves have lived since ancient times.”³⁰

Although there had been a Russian presence in the area for a few centuries, in 1816, the full brunt of the Russian forces headed into the region and began building a Caucasian Line. A year earlier, they had asked the Chechens to surrender, but to no avail. Rumors had started circulating that raiders and thieves were gathering to ransack the line. The head commander in Georgia, EV Gydovich, wrote to the war commander of the Caucasian Line, SA Bulgakov, asking for permission to move over and, “Exterminate these barbarians who

creep up and continue to be rapacious.”³¹ A few months later, in February of 1817, Gydovich lead an expedition into Chechnya proper to help fortify the line. He once again met the “rapacious marauders” who had staged an uninterrupted attack that completely cut his all-important communication lines to Vladikavkaz. With little more than a few hundred riders, the Chechens had stymied 2,354 regular Russian Army troops and 1,834 Cossacks for over two months before Gydovich “pacified” the area.³²

A year after the building of Grozny, in 1817, the forty-seven year Caucasian War began. The creation of the war line confiscated much land from the Chechens, and was viewed as an important step in Russian imperialism. The peoples of the mountains also understood this was a serious threat to their independence and traditional way of life. Due to the actual raiding of Russian lines by *abreks* and their gangs, Ermolov quickly labeled the inhabitants as bandits and conducted official, punitive forays into *auls* (fortified villages found in the Caucasus) throughout Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan. In large part, argues Russian historian MM Bliev, the *abrek* raids were not just the work of bandits, but also anti-colonial warriors. It was a war against one of the great powers of the time, and the people of the North Caucasus had the idea that moral truth was on their side. It was not a war they asked for; the mountain people had slaying brought upon them and had been forced to defend their land, power, families, and way of life.³³

The Russian invasion did two things in Chechnya: it united previously battling *teips* and it turned the *abreks* into local heroes. In strong contrast to before and after wartime, a main characteristic of Chechen society was its impeccable discipline during battle. Once Russian atrocities and raiding became commonplace, villages and *teips* banded together to fight the intruders by creating their own centralized army and civilian administration.³⁴ An example of this was the civil, military, and religious administration set up by one of the most famous Islamic scholars and warriors in Chechen history, the Imam Shamil. In the middle of the century, the Imam created a highly disciplined, centralized fighting force that could not have occurred in times of peace. He divided his allied territories into provinces, and each province was subdivided into 5 *naibdoms* (districts) that were headed spiritually and administratively by *qadis* (Islamic judges) and elders. Each *naibdom* was required to have at least three-hundred mounted warriors, with recruits aged anywhere from fifteen to fifty. The *naibs* declared the law, decided disputes, and most importantly, summoned men to war.³⁵

Shamil also had a specialized, well-trained, and vicious bodyguard. Moritz Wagner, a German traveler of the time, classified them as *murtosigators*, from the Arab *murtaziq*, meaning mercenaries. This was a small misconception as the men guarding the Imam were not paid soldiers, but rather disciplined, hardened horse riders completely loyal to him who thought nothing of killing, kidnapping, and battling the intruding Russians no matter the odds or outcome. In a familiar description of the Chechen groups that would arrive on the scene in the late twentieth-century, Wagner calls Imam Shamil, “a 'terrorist' ruling through terror and enforcing his will with an energy bordering on wild cruelty.”³⁶

Much like the Chechen Wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, during the Caucasian War kidnappings became prevalent in the region, and the Imam's associates excelled at it. One of the most famous was his 1854 abduction of two prominent Georgian Princesses, Anna Chavchavadze and Varvara Orbeliania. After several months of negotiations, in addition to a substantial ransom, Shamil secured the release of one of his sons who had been taken captive by the Russians. Kidnappings could also be a form of insurance of an ally's good faith or against an enemy's ill-will. In the case of the Caucasian Wars, hostages could also be used as a source of intelligence, such as disposition of Russian or indigenous military forces. In addition, hostage-taking gave rise to a second economy. There were individuals, also known as speculators, ready to provide advance payment of a ransom in exchange for a certain percent in interest, and couriers whose main job was to deliver messages, ransoms, packages, and sometimes the hostages themselves. In the mountain regions there were also people who provided loans to captives for an IOU of eventual release. The total number of kidnappings is hard to come by, but at the peak in mid-nineteenth century, there were perhaps as many as two thousand per year.³⁷

For the Russian army, fighting on the general level became a type of raiding and retribution, things that the mountaineers excelled at. Here they faced an abundance of multipurpose light cavalries, whose riders had knowledge of local terrains and lethal long guns. Never was there a real pitched battle, but rather mobile groups, many of whom were gangs of *abreks*, stealing across lines for supplies. At the same time, the locals could not be trusted as they would go with the Russians or against them, depending on the time of year or what had previously occurred in the war. Tactics devolved into punitive retaliation by each side, and would become a blueprint for the fighting a century and a half later. The Russians

knew they had to cut the lifelines of the guerrillas and *abreks*, and to that end villages that had or could have harbored them were destroyed. Crops were burned or ordered ploughed through, herds of cattle and flocks of sheep were slaughtered or stolen. Although the devastation was apparent, to many Chechens it was only a stepped up version of warfare they had known for centuries: tit-for-tat raids and blood feuds.³⁸

By the mid-1830's, disturbances and gatherings of thieves and marauders in the region were a serious threat to the Russian military. In order to stem the onslaught, Russian military officials met with village elders, mullahs, and other parts of society who were not involved in the fight. They set down a list of rules for the villagers to abide by that included, but were not limited to, any foment against or killing of Russian military was punishable by death. Any person caught sheltering *abreks* or Shamil's army had their weapons taken away, those that deprived the Russians of help or shelter also had their guns and weapons taken away from them, and rebellious gangs would be punished to the full extent, which usually meant a death sentence if caught.³⁹ In addition, the military government awarded the mountaineers for good behavior. Villages, or tribes, that did not associate with *abreks* were allowed a modicum of self-government and were even given rifles to help when the raiders came into their areas to steal. The authorities were also lenient with those bandits that reached out for forgiveness. On a promise of never picking up arms or thieving again, some *abreks* were allowed to stop wandering, return to their homeland, and become citizens. Although the lenient measures had been taken, in the Kalmyk region Russian General Grabbe acknowledged that even getting a few of the raiders to turn in their weapons was a difficult task. In a letter to Russian War Minister AE Chernishev, he says the bandits were, "running around Russian superiority and control and always promoting breakthroughs by predators... (*abrek*) Sulak is wandering on my left and he has not been subordinated by Russian power. They have been raiding with impunity clearly to make a haven for other *abreks* and to make sure that the *abrek* Yunis and his comrades are safe."⁴⁰

These measures were motivated by the idea that in many areas, especially the highlands, Russian power was limited and in some cases, completely ignored. Highlanders were good at concealing crimes committed in their villages from the authorities. In most cases, this concerned murders and rapes, crimes that could provoke a blood feud. The Russian authorities had tried to stamp out customary law and implant it with their own, but in

the more remote areas this was near impossible. Khabardians, Chechens, and Dagestani highlanders settled these types of disputes without appealing to the village or district courts that the Russians had set up. Horse stealing and plundering were also hidden by the local population, but civil and military courts did reveal a good number of smaller cases that related to the buying and gifting of cattle captured in raids, also known as *zekwe*. In essence, the highlands were a safe haven for the *abreks*.⁴¹

As the war dragged on, violence in the region gave the *abrek* gangs ample opportunity to perfect their craft as raiders. They were declared social outcasts by the Russian leaders and gradually were transformed from immoral lawbreakers to professional criminals and folk-heroes. Arising from the milieu, secret support for the *abreks* made them able to continue their raiding and robbing, and then slip into the general public without being caught. The inability of the Russian forces to quell the *abreks* could be seen in General-Major Gramotin's 1853 report to Moscow, in which he argued, "In Khabardino and other connecting areas of North Caucasus, many (*abreks*) come and go and hide in different places with their people. Where they bed it is impossible to find, but my guess is that it is in the good graces of everyone. We know not when or where they will arrive, and are therefore not able to notify anyone of their location."⁴²

In 1859 however, as Imam Shamil was captured by the forces of General Bariatinsky, and the war in the eastern area of the North Caucasus, including Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan, concluded. The Russians set up a civil and military administration that immediately turned its goal towards eliminating or exiling the *abreks*, declaring them robbers, killers, and true raiders who lived outside of the law. After the decree, the outcome was not what the Russians were looking for as more gangs appeared in strength. The authority's reports of the time portray Chechnya as run through with *abreks*, who were continuing the people's famous traditions alive, and of which it was impossible to get rid of them one at a time. The usual Russian nomenclature of bandits, thieves, and sexual predators was given to the raiders, but the people did not call them criminals or rapists. Rather, the bandits were seen as true warriors against the Tsar, fighting and dying heroically in the name of the people. There is no question they had an element of criminality and thievery, but this just made them more popular in the minds of a people who had lived that way for centuries. Chechen historiographer N.P. Gritsenko argued that the phenomenon of the *abreks*, "was social and it

was an idea. *Abreks* dominated the whole epoch, the whole movement, well-brought up on fighting and independence and self-preservation. The meaning of the *abrek* fight was, without a doubt, heroism.”⁴³

After the War

Russian presence remained in the region after the war as they began to set up an administration. A harsh internal passport regime was imposed called the *bilet* system. Reminiscent of later Soviet policies, the mountaineers and lowlanders were not permitted to provide lodging to any guest who did not have a passport, and were required to inform the Russian governors about their neighbor's illegal guests as well. The system remained in place until the end of the nineteenth century bringing a modicum of centralization and control to the areas, but as a result of the social and criminal situation becoming more stable the foundation of professional banditry had been laid. It is important to note that the former legal practices of violence, including military associations, warlords, blood feud, and hospitality were outlawed and gradually reclassified as illegal, criminal practices. This turned formerly semi-legal military leaders and warlords into outright bandits deprived of rights and protection, but society never expelled them, and they became the main instigators of anti-Russian banditry.⁴⁴

As the situation became permanent, bands from ten to a hundred young men and Caucasian War veterans formed. They soon started robbing and burning Russian dominated villages, and when given the opportunity, kidnapping residents on the plains whom they thought were collaborators with the Russians. Living the life of a professional criminal, *abreks* could not return to the peasant life they were accustomed to, and all were well aware that they were outcasts until their death. In this period of history, the growing number of bandits was directly connected with the independence movement of the mountain people from the Russians. Many had fought and died next to Shamil. Two of the most well-known outlaws of the age, Nasir-Abrek and Atabi Karachevsky perished in the war, and the Russians had first-hand knowledge of how fiercely these men fought. Field Marshall DA Miliutin, one of the men tasked with capturing Shamil in the Dagestani aul of Guniba wrote, “The number of defenders in Guniba was filled with the daring and terrible *abreks*.”⁴⁵

The bandits had first used the carnage of the war to wreak havoc, to raid, and to resolve lingering blood feuds, but after the war this would evolve into a nonstop anti-Russian

campaign. They directed their spring and summer raids out of traditional hard to reach places in the *raion*: covered by the woods and the mountain ravines of south Chechnya, western Dagestan, and northern Azerbaijan. The objectives of the attackers frequently began in villages where a blood-enemy resided. A well-known story is that of the blood feud between the Chechen *abrek* Vara and the *naib* (local Islamic leader) Murada Hydanata. Through promises of non-violence and shelter, Murada had enticed Vara to his home and let a Russian contingent know of his arrival. Once Vara had entered, dragoons surrounded the house, and Vara was killed in the ensuing gunfight with them. This is a typical story of the period of one side using the Russians to kill a blood feud enemy, and is also an example of how banditry and blood feuds would soon connect with the freedom movement. In that time, the violent groups formed to preserve their way of life from the Russians and those who cooperated with the Russians. They were living as professional thieves, they were not able to return to their peaceful peasant lives and were aware of their status as outcasts.⁴⁶

Subsequent treatment was also cause for large anti-Russian sentiment, and a large portion of the Chechen population chose to emigrate. Early Chechen historian A. Rogov estimated that in 1847 there were one-and-a-half million Chechens in the area, but by 1861 there remained a mere one-hundred forty-thousand.⁴⁷ At the same time, Russians who were in the area did not have such a forgiving and romantic perception of the highwaymen, and the culture that evolved around them. Many Russian authorities considered deportation of the Chechens to their religious brethren in the Ottoman Empire. Though mass deportations of the Chechen people would wait for a later date, in separate letters to cavalry officer and civil administrator Count Mikhail Loris-Melikov, Russian Colonel Bellik and Prince Aleksandr Tumanov describe how the *abreks* had pervaded the culture and fomented rebellion. Bellik communicated the idea that all the Chechens were convinced of the invincibility of the outlaws and in conjunction, the whole region known as *Ichkeria* (the Turkish name for what was southern Chechnya, and would later become the name of the secessionist republic after dissolution). The *abreks* could take a minor problem and turn it into a large disturbance, and the people would harbor, help, or join them at the first chance they got. A month later, Prince Tumanov warned Loris-Melikov about the effect *abreks* were having on society, especially young men. "The spoiled Chechen youth, accustomed now as they are to robbery and murder,

will seek to display once again their prowess and thereby, will actually be defending themselves from the destruction...the Russians are now preparing for the entire population.”⁴⁸

This is when, argues Soviet Scholar A. Sheripov, the *abreks* began to be looked upon as heroes, not criminals. Many locals felt oppressed by the *bilet* system, the political and military administration, and the hunting down of natives guilty of crimes against the Russian state, not local laws. Bands began to form not only in Chechnya and Dagestan, but all over the Caucasus, including South Ossetia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. Choosing a life of running from the authorities had become a self-sacrifice as they slipped from hounding police and soldiers, appearing in one place then the other, strongly resisting the Tsar’s power. They remained elusive and within the mass of the people had become enormously popular. Sheripov wrote, “The people looked on the *abreks* as warriors against domination and brutal rule...the *abreks* began to have an honorable name and this was not bestowed on all.”⁴⁹

As the situation evolved, no longer were the groups raiding and robbing large roads, farms, and other localized areas of wealth, but they also led skillful attacks on Russian forts and murdered officers or collaborators when the chance struck. In one case in 1872, a gang of fugitives murdered the Chechen leader of the Khasavyurt *okrug* (area or district) that was visiting their area because he was believed to have gained power with the help of Russian officials. But for every attack like this, there was retribution. In fighting the bandits though, the Russian powers found out exactly how popular the idea of an anti-colonial movement had become. In many instances, local and unarmed citizens were unsuccessfully interrogated to give up the names and whereabouts of the Russian’s adversaries.⁵⁰

During the Russo-Turkish, in the years 1877-78, an anti-colonial rebellion flared in the North Caucasus, and *abreks* were at the forefront. This was due, argues historian Rebecca Gould, to the *abrek* becoming the ultimate tool of Chechen cultural self-expression. The word itself developed into a term of respect that was earned, and the people did not honor just anyone with this title. It was not only about going out to steal, pillage, kidnap, and kill because that is what outlaws do, but rather *abreks* became concerned not only with their own economic well-being, but the well-being of their entire community. These acts of selflessness began to be an expression of the wills, the strivings, and the dreams of an entire people. She contends it should not be forgotten it was the Russians who were the ones who changed him from a refugee of blood revenge into a mythical hero, a Jesse James-type of rider opposing

Russian colonization through acts of crime and bravery. In many areas, *abreks* became sanctified because they were fighting a war that was not motivated by greed, lust, or boredom, but rather a *ghazavat*, in the Chechen sense: a holy war that was noble, just and sacred; a war that was undertaken for the defense of the homeland.⁵¹

Scholars have developed many explanations for the rise of the *abreks* at this time. Chechen ethnographer F.I. Leontovich argued in 1882 that the traditional idea of raiding had evolved after the war into outright robbery, and they cloaked it in a fight for Islam. Such representations give *adat* as a main reason for criminality and the pursuing of cruelty due to it being honorable. He writes that the *abreks* had, “goals of seizing livestock, robbery, treasure hunting, and hiding their fighting in religious thought; in a word, the representation and admiration of riches was the highest rewards, and abuse of the village people was a main goal in justifying violence for these rewards.”⁵² Soviet scholar M. Mamakaev calls this raiding a “source of original accumulation.” Many riders attached their personal valor and bravery in battle to the allocation and storing up of other people’s property and treasure after the war. At the same time, in the late 1870’s, inter-*teip* divisions began forming into economical camps. The theft of livestock, seizure of pasture, and capturing well-known *teip* leaders with subsequent retribution and demands of ransom all fell into the category of an inner-Chechen war for wealth. All for the sake of preserving honor and reputation, and some went as far as the theft of corpses with the goal of acquiring ransom or insulting the honor of an enemy.⁵³

Soviet scholar N.E. Pokrovsky argues it was a long, bloody war of partisanship; revenge and marauding came from both sides, and conferring raiding in war to raiding in peace time was not implausible. In addition, the peoples who lived on the periphery of the Russian Empire, not just the North Caucasians, tended to be hardened and excellent at guerrilla warfare.⁵⁴ To go further, many in the Tsar’s army were sent to the Caucasus as punishment, and Russian behavior in the North Caucasus was less than exemplary at times, causing a rift between the authorities and the population. Beginning in the 1820’s, Tsar Alexander I banished so many men to the area that he personally nicknamed it the “southern Siberia.” His successor, Nicholas I, greatly expanded the number of military exiles, and in reprisal for the anti-government Decembrist revolt, he deported 60 officers and more than 2,400 soldiers. In addition to deportations, army commanders customarily punished “depraved” (deserters) and “undesirable” (thieves) soldiers by assigning them to the

Caucasus. Thus, many of the Russian Army's more unsavory characters were stationed in Grozny and the surrounding areas.⁵⁵

The soldiers soon found out how unromantic the war was. Tails of beautiful scenery and women were replaced by hunger and the moral uncertainties they faced in battle. Poet Aleksandr Polezhaev, himself sent there as a punishment, soon realized that Lermontov's war as an opportunity to travel and see exotic cultures was traded by the feeling of being led to slaughter. In these conditions, and with much of the military made up of less-than-desirable soldiers, the Russian Army's punitive raids often turned into murder of innocents. In his poem, "Chir Iurt," Polezhaev discusses his regiment's 19 October 1831 storming of the Chechen village. It begins with them leaving Grozny with a feeling of patriotism, which quickly turned into bloodlust, to be followed by a feeling of shame. Once the regiment arrived at the village, no one was spared, children, women, the old and infirm included. Polezhaev never recovers from the butchery that he witnessed and took part in, as his poem relays: "Just what shall a poet's monument be? / His uniform?... Unthinkable!...The wrongs he did?.../Those are quit-rent for the world beyond..."⁵⁶

The Century Turns

In the early years of the twentieth century, Russian oil—and that meant oil from the Caucasus, especially Baku, Azerbaijan and Grozny—was internationally looked upon as a prize. Next to Baku, the district of Grozny was the most important oil area before the revolution, and shallow wells had been producing oil since 1833.⁵⁷ However, systematic geologic study of the area only began in 1890 by mining engineer Afanasy Konshin, who pointed out in his report that it was acceptable to start drilling where reliable oil strata would be encountered at a moderate depth. The attempt was a failure, and others like it were not producing large quantities until 6 October 1893, when from a depth of 430 feet the first gusher in the history of the Grozny fields was located. According to eyewitness accounts, once the fountain had quieted down, it had risen 10 *sazhens* (70 feet) above the top of the pipes, with only a few interruptions. A mining engineer named Lev Baskakov immediately sent a one-word telegram to entrepreneur Ivan Akhverdov in nearby Vladikavkaz that read: "GUSHER." The first flowing well in Grozny was used until 1902, and it produced a total of close to 89,000 tons of oil.⁵⁸

News about the gusher quickly spread through the country. Over the next twenty years, tens of millions of rubles of private, foreign, and Russian government investment went into the building of wells and fields in the Grozny region. Workers from all over the region came, and Grozny became an oil town. In 1897, it had three refineries that produced petroleum products valued at 750,000 rubles per year. A year later, the oil fields would be connected by five pipelines that annually combined to move an estimated 23 million barrels. By 1905, Grozny refineries were producing a combined total of more than 3.6 million barrels of oil annually (more than 540,000 tons), and in 1915 it had its prerevolutionary peak of 33,400 barrels per day and accounted for about eighteen-percent of Russian oil production.⁵⁹

As large amounts of people and money flowed into the region it soon became considered one of the wildest provinces in any of the Russian territories. Grozny was compared to the notorious Texas oil towns, and Chechnya as the “Wild West.” Two Western observers commented that in a society such as this, crime and ruthlessness were just a part of everyday life. Grozny was where, according to British North Caucasus witness John Baddelay, “the chord or triad of brigands, rifles and revolvers proved to be the leitmotif of existence.” Especially bad were the Chechens who were “addicted to brigandage, which was with them the very breath of being.” The capital had become an important oil town in the Russian empire and the danger lay in the fact that eighty-percent of the town ran on oil, but the other twenty ran on brigandry.⁶⁰ Italian Luigi Villari would also write of Vladikavkaz:

“I have rarely seen a place more full of ruffians than the bazaar, and murders and robbery were everyday occurrences. Only two days ago a band of Ingushes had come in to the town, murdered several people, plundered a couple of houses and ridden off undisturbed... The night before I arrived a band of 70 Chechens had held up a train near Grozny, murdered 15 passengers and 2 guards, and made off with a large amount of booty.”⁶¹

All the ideals for the necessity of the *abreks* were rounded into one argument by Russian historian Y. Chesnov. Freedom was the fundamental mentality of the Chechens, from birth the young were told it was central to their well-being. There was also a clear delineation of people on the principle of “us and not us.” The “not us” were not complete strangers, as Chechens were known for their gracious hosting of travelers, but that did not mean an outsider could break their rules. There was also the ideal that people were only on the land for a short amount of time, emphasizing that humans are guests on the earth. In this

short period a person should be good to defenseless children, women, the elderly, and try to never act wrongly against the land or animals. But the Chechens were also a brave people, and aggression that came from the outside would always be met with incredible resistance. It was the desperation of a daring people filled with honor and conscience that would go against such a force as the Russian empire, and there was none better who fit this description than one of the most famous of all *abreks*, Zelimkhan Gushmazukayev.⁶²

Zelimkhan and the Beginning of the Civil War

The next rebellion against Russian power, from 1905-1907, began during the 1905 Russian Revolution. The revolution not only undermined the Russian empire in the center, but also on the peripheries. The original structure of the resistance against the Russians began with the *abreks*. The Russians moved troops to the east to reinforce their weak position in Manchuria in their war with Japan. In connection with this, bands of *abreks* began robbing and pillaging in the Terek, Kubai, and Dagestan *oblasts*, as well as northern Azerbaijan. Although the raids were not directly politically linked to the worker's strikes or military mutinies, in southern Dagestan, popular *abrek* Buba Bey-Bulat and a band of 20 men roamed the coast of the Caspian from Baku to Makhachala. They proceeded to take taxes and tributes from every fishing village they entered, no matter whether they were a self-employed fisherman or a rich merchant, everyone paid Buba for his fight the Russians. He was well-known for his riding skills and fearless raids, and his most daring mission may have been to somehow steal a trade chest from an administrator's house in Derbent while the man and his wife were in the house. He also took guns, arms and ammunitions and sold them to finance his band, and was hidden successfully in hard to reach places by the locals, eventually his band numbered almost two-hundred. But all good things came to an end in 1913, when Buba was caught and killed by the Russian Army.⁶³

Meanwhile in Grozny, on 10 October 1905, Russian police forces fired into an industrial worker's strike, killing seventeen people. In retribution, a week later the *abrek* Zelimkhan and his band held up a passenger train near the Kadi-Yurt Station, robbed the occupants, and had the same number of Russian men shot.⁶⁴ Zelimkhan was born in 1872, in the village of Kharachoi near Vedenno. In 1901, his brother's wife had a child from another man, and not only was this a scandal in the village, but soon after his brother was murdered.

Naturally Zelimkhan declared a blood-feud against the other man, and it should have stayed between the two of them. However, the local Russian administrator, a Captain Khanshalov, began to investigate, and had Zelimkhan, his father, and two younger brothers arrested before they could avenge the murder. They were put into the Grozny prison where one of his brothers eventually died. As any good *abrek* would, Zelimkhan subsequently escaped prison with one objective, “I ran from Grozny prison with one goal, to avenge the criminal who brought this on my family, Captain Khanshalov, but he ran. He found out that I was free and sent people to me to say that he realized his mistake, said he repented and asked for me to forgive him, and not to hunt him down. I accepted this.”⁶⁵

But the Chechen soon found out the Captain was still hunting him, sending him into hiding, and thus unknowingly created the famous *abrek* Zelimkhan. Even though *abreks* were rarely ideological, by this time they were seen as anti-Russian heroes. Zelimkhan was known by everyone, and he could hide anywhere. In early 1906, a few months after his retaliation against the Russians for shooting workers in Grozny, Russian Lieutenant-Colonel Dobrovolski banished some of his family and villagers of Kharachoi to the Russian north with no legal precedence. Zelimkhan hunted him down and killed him. A year later in 1907, with a 3,000 ruble reward for his capture, Zelimkhan rode right into the center of Grozny and robbed a jewelry store that was located next door to the administrative head of the *okrug* and the main post of the military and 400 soldiers.⁶⁶

Zelimkhan seemed to be everywhere, and the Russian administration used the same tactic they tried earlier to flush him out. In the district of Vedeno, Colonel Galaev, signed off on the banishment of over 500 Chechens, mostly friends and family of Zelimkhan, to the Russian North. Later, in 1909, he and his band of sixty had surrounded the town of Kizlyar and challenged the colonel of the town with a note saying, “Don’t hide like a woman, come and meet me in Kizlyar.” The Russians laughed and said, “How could he ever get into Kizlyar, it is a fort?” So he took his men and they dressed up like Cossacks and rode right into Kizlyar and robbed the bank. Before leaving, he left a note to the colonel saying, “I waited for you. Where were you?” He got back to the mountains and handed the money to his people and orphans. That year the Chechen hunted down Colonel Galaev and shot him.⁶⁷

By this time, the Tsar had put a 5,000 ruble bounty on the man’s head, but to no avail as the mountain people supported and harbored Zelimkhan and other *abreks*, allowing the

bandit's forays into Russian-held territory to become more daring. In January 1910, he once again rode straight into Grozny, and attacked the train station. In the subsequent gunfight, he killed the station operator, wounded two guards, and got away with 18,000 rubles. Three months later, in response to the earlier deportation of Chechens from Vedeno, he made it his main goal to attack the Kizlyar treasury storerooms. Although his reputation as a Chechen Robin Hood was firmly in place, this raid was special because he had warned the authorities that he would raid the bank in Kizlyar at 12 noon on 9 April. Wearing a colonel's epaulets as disguise, he and twenty-seven riders attacked punctually, and quickly overwhelmed the bank's security. The treasurer, a man by the name of Kopytko, threw the keys of the bank out the window so Zelimkhan shot him. A firefight ensued, all the guards were killed along with nineteen civilians, and the raiders escaped across the Terek River suffering no losses. They had loaded two saddlebags making off with 5,000 Rubles in new copper coins. It was said after this that all Chechnya mocked the Tsar's police for their failure to stop him, and Zelimkhan once again distributed the proceeds among the poor and needy.⁶⁸

After this raid, he was cemented as the most famous of all *abreks* and occasionally others sought to use his name for criminal activities. One man, who falsely claimed he was Zelimkhan, was said to have taken a bull from a farmer by claiming he was the bandit. By chance the real Zelimkhan came along, brought the bull back and handed it over to the farmer together with an ear, saying: "The man who took your bull is a one-eared Zelimkhan. I am the true Zelimkhan for I have, as you see, two ears." His prestige was not lost on the authorities either. In September 1910, Prince Andronnikov, the highest-ranking official in the Nazran region, set off with a division to catch Zelimkhan. But the bandit knew the terrain better and he lured the troops into an ambush by a bridge and personally took the lives of Prince Andronnikov and First Lieutenant Afanasyev, while wounding the Dagestani Staff Captain Dayaghev.⁶⁹

It was not just Buba and Zelimkhan who gained notoriety though, as other bands roamed the North Caucasus raiding for booty. Sergei Berdiaev, a Russian administrator for the Tsar who had spent twenty-four years in the region mostly pursuing *abreks*, recalled one chase he had with a gang led by the infamous bank robber and nomad Adzhaev. He recounts the difficulties the authorities had in chasing and capturing the criminals. On 10 November 1911, in Stavropol, a gang of thirty recognizable bandits from the Terek oblast under the

leadership of Adhzaev, went to rob the house of the economic minister of the city. They broke into the household, murdered the wife, forced open a fireproof cupboard, and took an astounding 185,000 rubles. Berdiaev and the authorities followed the robbers for 2 days and a surprising 150 versts (an obsolete Russian unit of length equaling a little over 1 kilometer meaning that the raiders were riding almost 50 miles per day with the booty), and could not be caught. Once they got into the mountains, Berdiaev could not contact anyone for help through radio, telephones, or telegraphs because there were none out in the wilderness. In general, it was difficult to hunt the bands down as they could travel 80-100 versts a day, and could ride at night to evade the authorities. But Berdiaev did not view *abreks* as honorable bandits, but rather as criminals who stole other people's money, valuables, horses, bulls, and even produce. He wrote, "The hooligans even take tomatoes and grapes from the farms...and they hassle the peasants, which makes them terrorists."⁷⁰

Although there were isolated incidents, by 1910 authorities were pursuing all roaming bands with regular Russian soldiers and local police, and *abrek* activity began to decline. In 1913, they managed to lessen the *abrek's* influence considerably in the region by finding and killing Zelimkhan. The supervision of the operation was given to a Dagestani cavalry unit under the Ossetian Kibirov, who had been a soldier in Chechnya and knew the terrain and language. His undercover agents had linked up with the *abrek* doing small favors such as acquiring rifles and cartridges, or promising to build forts for the winter. At the end of September, Zelimkhan went to a farmstead not far from Shali, which Kibirov quickly surrounded. On the 26th, they began to exchange fire, and in the mayhem Zelimkhan was killed. On his persons was found three long rifles, two full cartridges, a bayonet, a dagger, binoculars, three letters in the *abrek* tongue, and a prayer book. His funeral was held in the cemetery in Shali.⁷¹

After Zelimkhan's death, *abrek* activity was spotty and did not flare up again until the Russian Revolution and subsequent Civil War. Many of the mountaineers saw 1917 as a signal to free themselves from the Russian Empire. After the first revolution in February, initiators of a national independence movement came together to form a democratic movement. In May, they named it the "Union of Mountain Peoples," and began trying to figure out how to run a centralized government. By the beginning of September, there had been a Second Congress with a new constitution. However, Bolshevik troops rolled into the

North Caucasus and the national movement was suppressed. On 6 November, there was an unscheduled gathering to amalgamate the mountain peoples under Soviet power with the “Mountain Soviet (Union).” In February 1918, Bolsheviks in Chechnya and Ingushetia began to actively fight against the mountaineer’s national government, and was overseen by *Sovnarkom*, or the Council of People’s Commissars, a committee created earlier by the Bolsheviks to supervise the restructuring of the new Soviet society. They tried to lean on the worker’s movement, but as in much of Russia, this proved to be hard because of the absence of workers and Bolshevik sympathizers. The first Chechen Marxist, A. Sheripov, wrote that in 1917-1918 there was not one Communist in all of Chechnya. Likewise, Khabardinian democrat P. Kontsev wrote that the Bolshevik difficulties sprang from the fact “that of the 5 million residents in the North Caucasus only 10 were communists.”⁷²

Consolidation of power also proved difficult because of the rise of raiding, stealing, and murders in the region. In May 1917, the new national party organized a militia with the main goal of fighting the thieves, but criminality in the Terek region, Dagestan, and Chechnya began to pose a severe threat to security, with the main zones of influence in the cities and surrounding farmsteads of Grozny, Veddeno, and Khasavyourt. In these areas, *abreks* began to appear again, and the authorities claimed that the mass of the public, more than eighty-percent, were thieves, robbers, and agrarian criminals. In one instance, a gang of riders raided a village and stole fifty horses, twenty cows, and other essentials to keep on living. When well-executed robberies like this began to occur on farmsteads the commissar of the *okrug*, Prince Kaplanov, complained in general terms, “I’m saying to you that I’ve had enough of this.” An authority on the political movements and history of the area, Timur Muzaev, argues that the revival of the *abreks* at this time was due to the confiscation of their land by the Bolsheviks, and that the mountain people were worried that they were heading for extinction.⁷³

On the question of land, the new Bolshevik powers declared the necessity to authorize against *shariat* (Islamic law) and *adat* to benefit the workers. What this meant was a vast confiscation of land from the native North Caucasians who were not in the Bolshevik Party, or those who harbored the agrarian bandits. In Khasavyourt, on 6 July 1917, there was a gathering of authorized persons of native and Russian people from the *okryg* to try and come up with a solution to the *abreks*. They proclaimed that the plundering of the area by the

robbers and the violence it brought infringed upon the true flow of life. This was answered, for instance in Vedenno, with an expeditionary force of Cossacks, battalions, artillery, machine guns, and even airplanes. The head of the Caucasus War *okrug*, General Mdivan, brought to Khazavyourt a Terek guard division, a platoon of the 44th light infantry battalion, and two battalions of the 113th reserves, for the express purpose of putting down the *abreks*. In Chechnya, the Terek oblast executive committee discussed this question on the 3-4 June, and the commission formed a people's militia of volunteers specifically to fight the outlaws. One such groups was under Sheikh Ali Mitaev, the head of the religious group (*vird*) of Kunta-Hajji (he will be discussed in Chapter three). On 11 June they began to gather intelligence and clashing with the *abreks*. The result was the killing of two soldiers and four wounded.⁷⁴

The biggest operation against the *abreks* was led by sergeant-major Berdikel Mezheet Tsekhaev. In a 29 June 1918 battle, his group killed eight bandits, gathered most of their horses, and arrested an estimated twenty individuals who were accused of assisting the outlaws. Under escort the robbers were put into the Grozny jail. Hunting *abreks* was a dangerous mission so in an effort to keep numbers up, the volunteers under sergeant-major Tsekhaev were declared heroes of the Grozny *okrug*, and appointed bonuses and rewards from the committee. Despite the efforts of the committee though, the Chechen landscape still had isolated and small groups of enthusiastic criminals. It was a paradoxical situation: the supposed democratically-elected national power (Bolsheviks) appeared not in any condition to be able to completely deal with their unruly, well-armed enemies. On 15 October 1918, the Commissar of Grozny, S. Gapaev, reported that although an investigation into the hijacking enterprise of hundreds of sheep and cows in the region had begun, they could not figure out who was responsible for the thefts. He wrote to the committee that it was not because of the lack of trying, "but with deepest regrets, such non-results have to be seen in view of an unruly and highly armed society."⁷⁵ As will be seen in Chapter Four, the Commissar was correct, and the Bolsheviks final consolidation of power in the North Caucasus would come at a heavy price.

Chapter 3: The Republic of Islam

Many have argued that Chechen identity cannot be thought of outside of the Muslim faith. Whether it is a nominal attraction to the religion, or a strict following of *sharia* law, in essence, one cannot be Chechen without being Muslim.¹ This is an interesting notion because as late as the middle of the eighteenth-century, the Vainakh (Chechen and Ingush today) tribes had a polytheistic structure: Christianity and Islam had an important place mixed in with paganism and animism. In 1770, Russian travelers had noted the “religious chaos” in the region, and that the people resisted the intrusion of just one religion and its laws in their daily lives. Thirty-five years earlier, a treaty between Iran and Russia was signed that left the Southern Caucasus under the influence of the Iranian leader Nadir Shah, and the seeds of Islam were planted. Taking advantage of his death, the Ottoman Empire moved in, and through missionaries from Turkey and Persia Islam began to take hold and spread from the South into the North Caucasus. Starting in 1762, in an effort to spread Christianity while looking for warm water ports, Elizabeth the Great moved the Russian border south to the Kuban River, and would later settle Christian Cossacks and Kabartays on the banks of the Terek River that flows through Georgia, Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan, on its way to the Caspian Sea. This move created tension between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, and the six-year Russo-Ottoman War from 1768-1774 began. The war ended with a Russian victory and the Treaty of Kuchak-Kinarji, which moved the official Russian border to north of the Terek, and expedited the moving of Don Cossacks, Germans, and Russians into the area. This is also when the Russians annexed the Crimean Khanate, and immediately labeled the non-Russian inhabitants of the areas as outlaws and pagans.²

All of these moves created animosity in many of the North Caucasian tribes, and a resistance movement began that cemented Islam as the religion in the region. The first to initiate resistance under the banner of Islam was a Chechen shepherd by the name of Ushurma, who would later be known as Sheikh Mansur. He was born in the village of Aldi in 1722, but did not begin his anti-Russian activities until the age of seventy-three when he sent out letters appealing to Muslims about the decadence that the Russians were bringing to the region. He argued that believers had been drawn into the drinking and tobacco smoking of the Russians, and cautioned that sinfulness was creating ignorance in the religious. A later letter explicitly prohibited any contact with Russians, even if a person was sick and needed to

see a doctor. “Anything Russian is forbidden, as is any manner resembling that of the Russians. If you do get ill, do not go to a Russian physician, because you might end up befriending him.”³

Tribes began to follow him and on 26 June 1785 some seven-thousand Russian soldiers under Colonel Pieri left the town of Kumkale for Mansur’s home of Aldi. Because the Ottomans had not given him permission, and they were the Islamic power in the region, Mansur said he was not at war with Russia. Nonetheless, Pieri advanced and burned Aldi to the ground. In retaliation, Mansur and some twelve-thousand men ambushed Pieri’s forces on their way back to Kumkal, leaving only one-hundred alive. This made the Sheikh a household name, and people flocked to his side while most of Dagestan and Chechnya called him their leader. After this success, he chose for his banner a yellow, red, and green flag that his warriors began to wear. For the next two years, he went head to head with one of Catherine the Great’s favorite generals Pavel Potemkin, eventually being routed on 2 November 1785 at Tatartub near the Terek River. In 1786, Mansur continued his attacks, but was forced to flee to the Ottoman fortress of Anapa where he remained for the next five years. During the Second Russo-Ottoman War (1787-1792), Anapa was besieged and Mansur was taken captive. He was then taken to Saint Petersburg and the nearby *Tsarskoe Selo* (Tsar’s village) so Catherine the Great could personally see the man who had defied the Russian Empire. This would also be the case more than a half-century later with the most famous of Chechen Islamic warriors, Shamil. After meeting him, Catherine found Sheikh Mansur guilty of organizing Caucasian tribes to fight against Russia. He died three years later in the Saint Petersburg fortress-prison of Schlisselburg as a criminal. His legacy would live on in the next century though, as Turkish scholar Zubeyde Gune-Yadcy argues, “He was the first to preach and lead the Holy War against the infidel Russians in the Caucasus.”⁴

Although Mansur died in 1793, he did three things in the North Caucasus that secured his heritage. Firstly, he expanded Islam into many pagan enclaves in the mountains. Secondly, he showed that Islam could be used as a unifying force to resist the Russians, and lastly he sowed the seeds of what many nineteenth-century Russian authors would call *muridizm*.⁵ The term would later come to designate the national liberation movement of the Northern Caucasus people during the Caucasian War, and the ideology also imparted a religious aspect and a certain organized character to the struggle of the divided and

linguistically diverse mountaineers. The main characteristic of *muridizm* was that it combined the religious teachings of Sufism with political action, which took the form *ghazavats*, or wars of liberation, against the foreign intruders to secure the triumph of Islam.⁶ Being forced into the mountains by the Russian military, the Chechens, Ingush, and the people of Dagestan had met the Russian advancement with fierce resistance, especially the Chechens and Dagestanis. They were organized by the two Sufi brotherhoods of the region, the Naqshbandi and Qadiriya that would become the main drive against any form of foreign influence and domination.⁷

Sufism

Sufism is a mystical, spiritual part of Islam that came to the Northern Caucasus as early as the eighth-century. Even though it did not take a real hold in the region until Sheikh Mansur, one of the main appeals was its less stringent take on Islam than more orthodox interpretations. Sufi mystics focused on the individual's relationship with Allah, and was more tolerant in its approach in tying together local customs such as being generous with visitors no matter their religious beliefs under the greater ideal of Islam: a universal brotherhood or *umma*. Each Sufi disciple followed a sheikh on a certain path, and on this path the "secrets of spiritual life" were handed down. The relationships carried moral obligations and privileges that are closely paralleled to ranked societies of guilds and trades. But in the final sense, Sufism was, and is, about one's personal experience with Allah. While individualism remained fundamental throughout Sufi history, another main function was the organization of the community through the *umma* and Sufi brotherhoods began to appear in communities that traditionally lacked central organization. The brotherhoods practiced no adherence to a nation; rather their allegiance was concentrated among their tribal communities. Historian Joanna Swiriszcz sums the brotherhoods up in historical terms, "Throughout history they have been protagonists of injustice and social struggle and one of their main historical roles has been to oppose foreign rulers in order to safeguard Islamic purity."⁸

The first Sufi order to appear and organize in the North Caucasus was the Naqshbandi brotherhood. The order was founded in the thirteenth century by a Bukharan named Baha-ud-Din Naqshband. There are eleven principles on the path that include, being aware of the

moment; being attentive; continual awareness of God, oneself, and one's surroundings; and the awareness of number. This was an expression meaning the observation of the number of individual repetitions of *zikr*, a devotional exercise of reciting verses of the Koran. The invocation can be short phrases or prayers that can either be said silently or out loud. The *zikr* is not only one of the greatest obligations to the divine order, but it will also become an important turning point when Russian authorities outlaw it, and the population continued it illegally.⁹

The formation of the Naqshbandi brotherhood in Chechnya came by way of Dagestan in the early nineteenth-century by a man named Sheikh Muhammad al-Yaragi. By this time, Dagestan was a center of armed conflict with the Russian empire, and local Islamic leaders were being undercut by the foreign authorities. The sheikh, who was not taken seriously by the Russians, began using propaganda calling for *sharia* (Islamic Law), and calling men to *ghazavat* against the Russians. The brotherhood began to integrate themselves with the local population, and called on Chechens to abandon drinking and smoking, as they were habits that the foreigners brought to the mountains. They also called on one in ten Chechens to study Arabic and the Koran, and one in ten of every family to become a warrior under the command of one of al-Yaragi's *muridz* (student), Magomet. The warriors wore white turbans, and as they moved through the area people who were aspiring to political importance within the movement were able to possess flawless knowledge not only of Islam, but also the traditional culture of Chechen life. In a time of looming Russian dominance in the region, al-Yaragi's main idea was that of purity and egalitarianism, and the ideology of the Naqshbandi quickly spread in Chechnya. One of his main arguments was, "A Muslim cannot be a slave, he should not pay taxes to a foreign ruler, and all are equal in the eyes of Allah."¹⁰

As Russia consolidated its power, they began to combine traditional *adat* with Islamic law. These pressures of colonialism led to the blooming of the new Sufi ideology for liberation and self-determination, *muridizm*. When the Russians combined social and religious law it went directly against Chechnya's socio-cultural conditions. *Muridizm* appeared as spiritual purification of Muslims from the imposition of a foreign religion, the perceived impurities of the new society, and the inequities of the new order. It also showed the way (*tariqat*) for those who sought to become real Muslims. It also led to the political goal of the *ghazavat*. It should be noted that *ghazavat* is not *jihad*, or holy war, but it is the

zeal of a Muslim on his way to Allah; a rebellion against oppression; and a fight against local customs that are not *sharia*, the aristocracy, or soldiers of Russia. This turned al-Yaragi from a Muslim fighting with moral admonitions and appeals into a freedom fighter and a criminal. *Muridizm* was a moral response to what they felt as the degradation of Chechen society.¹¹

The *muridz* had tried to unite all of Chechnya and Dagestan to fight Russia, while doing this they also fought traditional kinship structures. In order to wage war against Russia they also waged war on those seeking to replace customary law with *sharia* law, the opposite of what they had started out to achieve, and a turf war had been created by Islam. *Murid* resistance soon became a struggle against the provincialism they perceived had taken over in the North Caucasus, but they had the same problems the Russians did with bringing all under one law. Their rise had also created a three-way struggle in the region with opposing representations of social institutions: traditionalist, Islamist, and Russian. By the middle of the nineteenth-century, North Caucasian tradition was under assault from both the Russian and Islamic modes of expansion. *Kadis* (Islamic judges) became members of the courts, served as consultants on issues of Islamic justice, maintained records, and managed Islamic affairs. Village assemblies that had been called for centuries to ensure justice, were still allowed, but held no real power. Many Chechens were not happy with this relationship, and a home-grown, underground rebellion ensued not against the Russians, but rather the *murids*. One Chechen man observed, “Thus, *adats*, and the courts that are based upon them, serve us as a firm foundation in approaching the lengthy and covert fight with Islamic clerics for influence over these people.”¹²

Trying to bring a new set of laws into Dagestan and Chechnya was a difficult process. Land was private or communal, and the shortage of arable land and pastures stirred up antagonism between rural communes (*tuqums* in Chechnya) and led to constant clashes. With no central authority to mediate the clashes, a peaceful solution was difficult at best. Once conflict arose it was hard to stop, and as stated earlier, entire clans were held responsible for a single misdeed, making both compromise and retreat difficult. What began to evolve was the contrast of civil law based on *sharia*, and criminal law based on *adat*. To make it more complex, the two types of laws were found in different areas; in the lowlands *adat* came under the influence of Islam, while the mountains remained nominally Islamic, but were still predominantly based on the pre-Islamic system. What made the law systems complex were

the differences in how crimes were viewed by the respective systems. Firstly, there was the notion of personal versus collective responsibility. In *sharia* law, it was the person who committed the crime who paid for their actions, but in traditional society the transgression was against the whole clan. Secondly, there was the idea of accidental versus deliberate crime. Whereas *adat* had no ruling or leniency on whether a crime was accidental, *sharia* law was clear that the punishment should not be as harsh if the incident was accidental, which balanced the severity and punishment of the act. Lastly, the legal procedures and means of carrying out justice differed. With two types of laws came two types of oaths. A person could either swear on the Koran, or customarily on a person's wife or dead ancestor while witnessing was more important than written evidence because no one could read. The confusion was also compounded by the fact that *sharia* did not concern itself with theft because it dealt with compensation, which was a large portion of crimes in the area. All the while, in most clans, the abstaining of alcohol and smoking were not adhered to, and most Chechens did not pay *zakat* (religious tax). All the confusion between the two sets of laws resulted in the manipulation of laws and corruption. Added to this, in Chechen society, a verdict was only accepted if all the judges, Islamic and traditional, came to a unanimous decision. This was very rare, and even if it did happen, one could appeal or just ignore the verdict as there was no central force to enact laws or judgments.¹³

Shamil

Sheikh Mansur became a leading Naqshbandi after claiming visions of horsemen sent him by the Prophet, and then announcing himself as master. He wore a veil to conceal the radiance of his being, preached *sharia* law, and was a proponent of rebellion (*ghazavat*) not only against the Russians, but non-Muslim mountaineers as well. But the man who consolidated and centralized the region was the Imam Shamil. Shamil headed the cause of *ghazavat* after Mansur's death, was known to be able to jump 27 feet, could sever the butt of a rifle with one blow from his *kinzhal*, and was once seen to smite a Cossack from his saddle with one stroke.¹⁴ He quickly set up his state based on *sharia* law while trying to eradicate the traditional *adat* system. When local leaders did not support him he put his relatives in positions of power. Much like many organized crime and terrorist groups today, he created a hierarchy of power with himself at the "Head of the Pyramid." He named deputies *ad hoc*,

and was the chief interpreter of the law. Saturday and Sunday were for listening to grievances, and justice was dispensed on the spot. His *naib*'s (deputies) were responsible for keeping day-to-day order in their regions, but he had spies in all places to make sure they were dispensing justice through *sharia*. Each *naib* had 300 armed men from ages 15 to 50, and were required by Shamil to be able to fight on a moment's notice. As mentioned earlier, he had his own special bodyguards, known as *murtozigators* (mercenaries), who were renowned for their fearlessness and violence. Much of what Shamil tried to accomplish dealt with religion, administering and centralizing the region, and creating a fighting unit with real military regulations. But in trying to supplant *adat* he also created his own set of laws that included the prohibition of cutting wood for personal use, contact with Russians, and criminalizing the lucrative business of falsifying of Russian coins.¹⁵

Shamil conformed to the Naqshbandi Sufi tradition based on spiritual sobriety, and the fulfillment of exoteric Islamic codes. Even though it should be noted that Chechens were fighting off foreign intruders well before the Russians came in, his fight against the Russians solidified two ideals that had begun before him. The first was that Islam became a marker of identification that made them different from the Russians, meaning Chechnya was a single community facing a common threat. The second was *sharia* provided ideas for building a centralized state. Perhaps most importantly, he tried to ban blood feuds, seeing them as both contrary to Islamic morality and law, and as a divisive threat to his efforts to build a unified region. If Islam gave the people a common identity, then *sharia* provided legal concepts and moral norms. Shamil's power was not absolute however, as the predilection for defying authority outside the clan remained strong, and many took offense to his efforts to supplant *adat*.¹⁶ To many Chechens, the fight against Russia was to reassert their inalienable rights of the individual, to maintain their way of life and social institutions that had been designed to defend civic communities from authoritarian encroachment, and to unite separate peoples and polities into a single state. Even Shamil understood that it was not completely about religion. A traditional Muslim scholar, historian, and secretary to Shamil, Muhammad Tahir al-Qarakhi, wrote, "A state can keep on living under unbelief, but not under oppression."¹⁷

However, the fact was Shamil ran a state where he was the last arbiter of the law, and punishment followed for those who did not abide by his rules. In late 1839, he arrived in Gharashkiti and many flocked to him for advice. Among them was a Chechen woman who

was going to be sold into slavery. Shamil defended her, arguing that according to *sharia* no Muslim was allowed to be enslaved. The man's house where he was staying was selling the woman and he came forward arguing that he was guaranteed a large sum of money for the woman and demanded that Shamil let her be sold. Not only did Shamil refuse the man's request, but he also pulled out his *kinzhal* to make sure the man knew his say was final. This unimaginable violation of one of the strongest laws of *adat* that holds relations between guest and host as most sacred deeply shocked those present, even the men surrounding him. The man backed down, but Shamil had broken the laws of *adat*, and through Islam he was creating a new social structure while living by his own laws.¹⁸

Shamil was not just a freedom fighter or a military-administrator, he was also a man not afraid to break the laws in exchange for getting something he wanted. In July 1854, in Kakheti, Georgia a group of his riders descended on Prince David Chavchavadze's estate. After looting and burning the 22-room mansion, they rode away with the granddaughter of the Georgian King Giorgi XII, Princess Anna Chavchavadze, and her younger sister Varvara Orbeliani. They also took six children, a family guest named Princess Nina Baratova, a French governess Mme. Anne Drancey, servants and their children, and some common folk outside. A month after the kidnapping the captives encountered Shamil at his Vedeno residence. Princess Varvara's late husband had been a captive of him as well, had been released earlier for ransom, and later died fighting the Turks in the Balkans in 1853. One of Shamil's men went and got her baby and told her he knew exactly who she was, he had held her husband in captivity, and added that he was a *dzhigit* (a brave), and had earned their respect. Thus proving that the Chechens were smart about who they kidnapped, and there was no randomness to their raid into Georgia. In their memoirs, the two Georgian princesses present Shamil as a Don Corleone-type supreme commander with absolute power; the type of power to make heads fly, as he personally warned them. But in general they talk about how good looking his sons and his horses were, especially the sleek and handsome Khazi-Magomet. His servants waited upon them, and provided luxury items for their meals, even candies only available in Tiflis at the French store Tollet's. Most of the kidnapers wore jewelry from past forays and raiding parties, but not Shamil. His retinue was well-disciplined, followed his orders, and were extremely graceful. It was soon found out that the main point of the kidnapping was to get his son, Dzhemaledin, back from the Russians. The tit-for-tat

worked, and not only did Shamil get his son back, but he also received 40,000 rubles for the entourage.¹⁹

On 25 August 1859, Shamil, his family, and his *muridz* surrendered to the Russian authorities after the Battle of Ghunib. What the man had done was turn an anti-colonial fight into a religious fight of “us versus them.” He took a heavily armed, secretive, and unforgiving people, and organized them into a hierarchical fighting organization. Before he had arrived, the fight against the Russians was sporadic and ineffective, but the seeds were there to be sown. In an 1823 meeting of Islamic elders and fighters, a Chechen General by the name of Prushanovsky argued, “Our people are not free, and dependent on Russia...but we are a brave people. One Muslim may go against 10 unfaithful, and will not be afraid to go again; to tread face to face, and that is how one acts to be rewarded.”²⁰ Using his *muridz*, and the ideals of *tariqa*, a school of Sufism that is derived from the words “way” or “path,” he had achieved turning the half-pagan mountaineers into Muslims. Just as importantly, as their *murshid* (leader) he created a brotherhood with a “strict hierarchy, total dedication, and iron discipline.”²¹ His surrender was so important to the fight, and the subsequent takeover of the region by the Russians, that Russian historians Nina Kiniapina and PA Fadeev compared the importance of the event with the earlier annexations of the Crimea, and Central Asia.²²

Prior to Shamil’s surrender, the Naqshbandi *tariqa* clearly took a political, violent character, and many Muslims in the area did not want to associate with the movement. In the early 1850’s, a new group called the Qadiriya, under the tutelage of Kunta-Hajji, came to the forefront summoning the stoppage of the Caucasian War in the name of saving the lives of Chechens who were sure to be killed. It was a movement that had its roots in twelfth-century Baghdad, and legend has it the shepherd from Dagestan went to Mecca where he learned the pacifism of the group. When he returned to the area, he went against Shamil’s *ghazavat* that was calling for war until a victorious end. A turf-war ensued, Shamil chased Kunta-Hajji out of the area for his anti-war preaching, and Kunta-Hajji did not return until Shamil’s surrender. By this time, the Naqshbandi had taken large hits from the Russian authorities and were in no shape to defend themselves against the new Islamic group creating a middle ground between them and the Russians.

Both the Naqshbandi and Qadiriya contained what are known as *virids*, a system of religious communities united in *tariqat*. They were tasked with upholding the main position

of each group with regards to Islam, and at the same time worshipped cults of sacred places. In the middle of these *virids*, were specific secrets of life that were passed down through the generations. Every *virid* had a leader they called sheikh who was tasked with playing a large role in religious life, and to a smaller extent, political life as well. A few were actively engaged in the political process and lead different people's movements with the most important being that of the *zikrists*.²³

As mentioned above, loud *zikr*, which means remembrance, is the reciting or chanting of the Koran to remember Allah. The Chechen *zikr* movement was founded by Kunta-Hajji. It was a mystical, ascetic undertaking meant to detach the practitioner from their worldly problems. It was based on non-violence and passive resistance, and people often danced while reciting verses. It was a direct way of having one's thoughts determine a way to achieve a desired goal. Although the *tariqats* were not outlawed, *zikr* was strictly forbidden by the Russians, and followers were advised to move to Turkey where there already was a North Caucasian diaspora; almost 5,000 families did so. Since it was illegal to be a *zikrist*, repression of the group by the authorities continued, and on 18 Jan 1864, 4000 *muridz* gathered in the village of Shali. They began an uprising that would become known as the "Daggers Afraid of *Zikrs*" rebellion. They were quickly surrounded by Russian forces, and in the ensuing battle, two-hundred were killed, another one-thousand were wounded, and many more were arrested and deported. Kunta-Hajji was arrested, exiled, and put in jail in the distant Novgorod *gubernaiia* (province), where he died three years later.²⁴

The Brotherhoods Go Underground

Although *zikr* was quickly outlawed by the Russians, Islam in general was not. The religion began to play a role in forming a philosophy of life outside of ethnicity. In time, Islamic etiquette, morals, and ethics following the words of the Koran became closely linked with *adat*. One of the largest orders of business in Chechen etiquette is how family members interacted with each other. For example, a husband and wife were not able to call each other so in the presence of strangers. That custom, a remnant from paganism and somewhat secretive, was also condoned by the Islamic leaders. Although there never was an official gradation in Chechen society based on titles or rank, there were divisions upon moral-ethnic terms that were independent from social status. In general, the progression of power went by

gender, age, social position, national characteristics, family ties, and the power of people you know and who they know. When Islam entered the region, it soon became as important as national characteristics, and would later be how every Chechen defined themselves. This did not sit well with the Russian authorities, and once they took control of the region they tried to supplant *sharia* law with *adat*.²⁵

The reasons for the assault on Islam and *sharia* were threefold. Firstly, the Russians understood *adat* and believed that it was more deeply ingrained in society, and more flexible than strict *sharia* courts. Secondly, by coopting and strengthening secular leaders over spiritual ones, the Russian military-civil administration tried to create a centralized authority while weakening Islamic authority. Thirdly, because of the fierce fighting against Shamil's *muridz* the Russians viewed *sharia* law, and the Naqshbandi and Qadiriya as real threats to their newly won state. However, because there was no educational system in place to create a qualified pool of people to work the new civil and military administration, *sharia* courts were given the right to consider religious questions and family issues such as inheritance and marriage; in essence, the Chechens were allowed to conduct their own personal justice on small matters, but the Russian military and civil administration made sure that most judgments were made by them. This did not appease the peoples of the region, and things began to simmer in May 1868 when the Russians began to bring in Christian Georgians (natural enemies of the Chechens) and Armenians to manage the government. One anonymous Chechen wrote to the Russian administrators, "You allow the tyranny and injustice of the Georgian bosses to come here, with whom we are eternal enemies and have always fought..."²⁶

Lastly, much like the Khazaks earlier, the Russians were using *adat* as a way to bring them closer to the empire. Many government officials believed that had they allowed the region to be consumed by Islam that would move them closer to the Ottoman Empire and Persia. Earlier in 1855, the end of Nicholas I's reign, state officials had been sent throughout the empire in an effort to get help from local officials in interpreting Islamic law. What they were trying to do was understand it in order to minimize the influence of it as the empire grew into new Muslim lands. In 1850, a former Caucasus official named Nikolai Tornau wrote, *An Exposition of the Principals of Muslim Jurisprudence*. This stood out as a practical key to all aspects of the new Russian Empire subjects' lives. Tornau argued that Russian officials

should be more in-tune with Islam, and it would be a huge mistake to not understand it better. When Britain and France colonized Islamic lands their policies had been to try and learn something about the religion. He added, “The experience in the administration of these colonies has shown them all of the practical importance of an element encompassing the secret way of life of the followers of Islam and forming the basis of their public, social and domestic life.”²⁷

Many in the Russian political system did not adhere to this, and the introduction of Georgians and other peoples into the region deteriorated already strained relations between the Russians and the North Caucasians. In trying to cut the head off of the snake, the Russians began arresting or killing both secular and religious leaders declaring them all “outside of the law, robbers, and true raiders.” This became a turning point in both the Islamic brotherhood’s and *abrek* movements as they once again took to raiding Russian lines. The Russians soon found it was impossible to get rid of these enemies of the state, and the process only intensified the people’s famous tradition of raiding.²⁸ Arresting and killing at will, while bringing in outsiders to run the government led Russian scholar Dmitry Shlapentokh to compare it to the United States’ government’s treatment of Native-Americans. He argued, “The full-fledged repressions against Muslims from the 17th century on, one that increased before and after the Caucasian Wars, were hardly different from the genocidal slaughter of the Indians by white Americans.”²⁹ To Boris Stomakhin, a Russian radical who contributed to the Chechen rebel website *Kavkazcenter*, and was later arrested and imprisoned by Russian authorities, this type of treatment against the Chechens could be compared with Jewish people who desperately defended their independence since the creation of Israel.³⁰

The policy of eradicating *sharia* had little effect, and in many cases it solidified the power the Sufi brotherhoods had on the region. From 1878 until the 1917 Revolution, the Naqshbandi and the Qadiriya never ceased to influence public policy forming an alternative system of administration that seeped into all social, religious, and political life in Chechnya and Dagestan. All of those who were not happy with Russia, including many *abreks*, joined the *murid* organizations that had become underground, clandestine, semi-conspiratorial networks of social protest that remained outside of Russian reach. Russian historian Anna Zelkina argues the irony of the situation is that in trying to combat and eventually eradicate Islam from the region the Russians Islamicized the area more than any other influence.³¹

Directly after the war, the idea of open *ghazavat* had been discarded, and this is one main reason why the *tariqas* acquired their underground characteristics. Once they gained notoriety for opposing Russian power, the *abreks* soon followed and began to wage war against the Russians with the Sufi Brotherhoods. Several *murids* and even *murshids* of the *tariqas* were *abreks*. For example, in the late 1890's Sheikh Elikhan of Shiddy-yurt, the second Naqshbandi *murshid* of the Aksay dynasty was caught, arrested and deported to Siberia for teaching Islam; he would eventually die there. His replacement, Sheikh Deni Arsanov, the third Naqshbandi *murshid* of the Aksay dynasty, killed the Russian authorities responsible for the deportation, thus making himself an *abrek*. For the next twenty years, Arsanov made a name for himself by being a pious, devout Muslim while raiding Terek Cossack and Russian lines, eventually falling in 1917 to a Cossack onslaught. The Naqshbandi Sheikh Uzun Haji, a future leader of the resistance during the Revolution, spent fifteen years in a Siberian camp only to be released in 1917 after the February Revolution. Examples abound of sheikhs and *abreks* being arrested and deported during this time, but the combination of an Islamic underground movement joining with *abreks* created a fighting force, "with an efficiency that only a brotherhood with spirit, total dedication, and iron will could ensure."³²

What was also specific to Chechnya was that beginning with Sheikh Mansur, Islam came in the form of mystical Sufism, and the *tariqas* of the Naqshbandi and Qadiriya. Sufism took its form based on the interaction and basic principles that guided the culture along with its ideologies and practices. Thus the main reason why the religion took hold in the region: it was elastic and evolved with the culture. A more strict form of Islam, which will come to the area in the late twentieth century, would not have taken hold in the freedom-loving region, but a less-strict, adaptable form distinctly neutralized it from being against the people. It showed its strength when Shamil was unsuccessful in trying to replace *adat* with *sharia* law, but rather the religion combined with *adat* to create a uniquely Chechen secular and religious combination.³³

Russian historian S. Umarov argued that the success of Islam had two reasons. Firstly, while Christian evangelists had earlier come preaching to forgive thine enemies, the Koran permitted situational revenge - an eye-for-an-eye and a tooth-for-a-tooth - but nothing more. Secondly, *jihad* or *ghazavat* suited Chechen society at the time. Although most passages in

the Koran deal with peaceful themes, it does discuss the idea that Muslims can defend their lives, property, and family if assaulted by outside forces. This began to spread through society affecting clan relations, as well as making the Russians their religious enemies. In a Chechen sense, men like Mansur, Shamil, and Arsanov, were not only spiritual leaders, but also military captains and raiders. Umarov argues, this was the advantage of being a spiritual leader in a society that did not look down upon bandits and raiding. A person could be both at the same time, “calling the people to *ghazavat*, they (spiritual leaders) nightly called for raids and thievery as war against the enemy, and to move the people ahead with promises of paradise.”³⁴

This is what historian David M. Hart calls, “social banditry in Islam.” There is a fine line between being a social bandit or resistance leader, and holy warrior. But during different times and circumstances one could be both. It also had to be considered that the bandit becomes a local legend either during his lifetime or right after his death, and thereby can distort history by becoming a larger-than-life, mythical freedom fighter as opposed to a common criminal. In essence, in many Islamic communities that were dealing with colonialism in the nineteenth-century, there were three types of bandits. The noble robber (Robin Hood), the primitive resistance or guerrilla fighter, or the honorable avenger.³⁵ In order to be the noble robber, a person would have to meet nine criteria, which include: beginning his career as a victim of injustice; later dying through treason, as no respectable member of society would turn him in; throughout his career he was theoretically invisible and invulnerable; he righted the wrongs; and when possible, he took from the rich and gave to the poor.³⁶ These are all attributes of *abreks* and spiritual leaders like Shamil and Arsanov.

Chechnya was not the only area where Islamic bandits gathered. In Northwestern Morocco, for example, there were groups called Jbala Gangs. Much like Chechnya, they were very organized and consisted of kinsmen. Although bandits who acted alone were rare they did congregate in the same areas and the members knew each other and could on occasion join. Each band was led by a man known as *kamman*, and it was imperative that he maintained good relations with his neighbors, who respected and feared him. If a guest entered his house he was treated equally and with courtesy. Travelers would run into these bands and be held up at gunpoint and robbed just for the clothes on their back. But they were

usually not completely left destitute as the bands would leave some food and water, “for to deprive a man of bread was truly shameful in the sight of God.”³⁷

The Revolution

The Russian Civil War in the North Caucasus was an arena filled with soldiers, deserters, and partisan bands. The Terek *oblast* (province or region), where many from Dagestan and Chechnya lived, was especially tense. A few towns, most notably Khasavyourt, were burned to the ground, and by the end of heavy fighting in 1921 it no longer existed. In the gap between the February and October revolutions the *abreks* and many sheikhs were politicized. Breaking with Tsarist Russian authorities, many grouped with Muslim leaders into large bands calling themselves “Red Partisans.” They joined the battle on the side of the Naqshbandi Sheikh Ali-Hajji, who had sided with the Bolsheviks with the promise of kicking the intruding Tsarist military out of the region. Others took the side of the White partisans, including the Avar sheikh Usun-Hajji and the Chechen sheikh Nadzhmuddin Gozinsky, who saw the Bolsheviks as unbelieving intruders. A few partisan groups from Dagestan and Chechnya also joined White Russian General Anton Denikin. In the spring of 1919, the “Holy Cross” battalion was created near Budyennovsk, and was called the 50th Mountain Chechen Cavalry *Divizion* of the White army. The Muslim volunteer battalion was made up of men who had lost relatives at the hands of the Red Army. In 1919-20, the division, known for its bravery and fierceness, made a campaign through Astrakhan, Ukraine, and Crimea. However, the majority of North Caucasians fought against the Whites. Not only did they remember the Caucasian Wars and subsequent treatment, but the White Army repeatedly behaved poorly during the fight for power in the region. Famous Russian writer Mikhail Bulgakov, who was assigned to the North Caucasus as a doctor in the Ukrainian People’s Army, noted the atrocities committed in the region, and wrote about the mobilization of the volunteer army against the Whites. In an October 1919 expedition near the Terek River, he witnessed the brutality recalling, “Heads beginning to be cut off, and that all ended nasty. After that, they burned the *aul* (fortified village), and everything else in sight.”³⁸

Earlier, in November 1917, when the Bolsheviks had taken control, Vladimir Lenin addressed the idea that the government was on the side of all working Muslims, and that the Soviet Union would be a state where all religions would practice freely without interference

from the state. This statement had an effect on Aslanbek Sheripov, an *abrek* turned “freedom fighter” known as Chechnya’s first Marxist. He felt that the situation could only be helped if other people came to fight against class enemies, and began circulating pamphlets trying to unite the workers of Grozny with the vanguard. He told them that after the fall of autocracy, the sheikhs and mullahs would join together and the Chechen people would be united. Sheripov helped expose counter-revs and exploiters, and in 1917 also wrote that the Bolsheviks had their work cut out for them as there was not one Marxist in the whole of Chechnya and Dagestan. However, Sheripov quickly realized that the Bolsheviks were atheists, and that their official stance was that religious philosophy “intoxicated” the society hampering class war and economic gain for the population. By 1918, Sheripov had changed his tune and argued that “the (Bolshevik) movement for freedom not only lay in land reforms, but in politics as well as the fight against the institutions of the sheikhs and mullahs.”³⁹

The mountaineers saw 1917 as a signal to free themselves from the Russian yoke as initiators of a national-independence freedom movement began connecting the post-February Revolution with an active democratic movement. On 1 May 1917, the “Union of Mountain Peoples” was created to figure out how to run a united North Caucasian government. By September, piggy-backing on the Bolshevik ideals of self-determination, a new constitution was created at the Second Congress. In response to this, on 6 November the Bolsheviks created the “Mountain Soviet (Union)” to amalgamate the mountain people under Soviet power. In February 1918, the “Terek Soviet Republic” was created, and overseen by *Sovnarkom*, or the Council of People’s Commissars, one of the highest councils in the Soviet Party that all states came under. Later that year, with the approval of the People’s Commissar Joseph Stalin who had been in the North Caucasus since 1919, the Terek Soviet Republic was combined into the “North Caucasian Soviet Republic.” The Bolsheviks tried to lean on the worker’s movement, but it was hard because even though Grozny was an industrial city, most other towns in the Republic were not large or industrial, and *Sovnarkom* began to acquire the features of an active fight against the mountain nationalist movement. Repeating the same mistake that Imperial Russian administrators made, the Bolsheviks tried to establish control with help of outsiders, including more Georgians, Armenians, and Khabardinians. Not only did this make the natives angry, but Khabardinian democrat P. Kontsev wrote that proof of

any gains made by the Communist Party was negligent because by the end of 1918, “of the five million residents in the North Caucasus only ten were communists.”⁴⁰

By the beginning of 1919, the White Army gained the upper-hand in the North Caucasus and the Republic was dismantled. For the next three years, some of the fiercest fighting of the civil war took place in the region, and society was polarized. The Red Army was fighting the White Army, both trying to recruit members. While bands of *abreks* and men from the *tariqas* were fighting for both sides, some groups were fighting against any foreign intruders. The year 1920 saw one of the most large-scale anti-Bolshevik movements during the war, and *abreks* took advantage of the mayhem to preserve their time-honored institutions of robbing and raiding. Rural bands of *abreks* terrorized the soviet and party workers in Dagestan, mostly led by the Naqshbandi sheikh Uzun-Hajji showing that religious leaders were combining with the bands in support of banditry. The “devil” (Russian connotation) Imam of Chechnya and Dagestan, Nadzhmytdna Gozinky, and local Naqshbandi sheikh and Shamil’s grandson, Shamil Said-Vekom, also led a successful partisan fight against Soviet power. In Kizlyar, Dagestan a fight ensued that left seventy-five Soviet and party workers dead. Eighteen months later, in the city of Darginsk, the band murdered party leaders V Mekeginsko and V Suringinsko. The Party quickly called the uprising “political banditry” and soldiers of the Red Army and of OGPU (Joint State Political Directorate in charge of state security), began to be stationed in the North Caucasus.⁴¹

Despite the efforts of the White forces as well as sporadic bands of *abreks* and sheikhs, the turning point in the war came in early 1920 as the Red Army began to make gains against Denikin. On 3 April, *Revkom* or the Revolutionary Committee, was created to clarify to the mass the goals of Soviet authorities, to hunt and find counter-revolutionary bands, and to purge the Soviet apparatus of enemy elements. It was headed by the Georgian Grigori Ordzhonikidze, a man who had fought in Georgia and against Denikin in the North Caucasus, a Stalin confidant, and someone who had known daily life in the region. He quickly began to inculcate *Revkom* into daily life by giving directives to help the working class, the working mass of the Cossacks living in *stanitsas*⁴² (a Cossack village inside a host or region), the mountain peasants, and to liquidate all national enemies and criminals. As the Soviets were developing the worker’s social consciousness there was clearly atheistic propaganda inculcated in the message, and many Muslim leaders summoned the people to fight back by

appealing to their religiosity under the flag of “defending the faith.” By this time Islam was deeply entrenched in society, and the Islamic leaders had no problems recruiting. In 1920, Soviet officials counted 2,675 mosques, 60,000 *murids* and members of different organizations, 38 sheikhs, 850 mullahs, and 140 spiritual schools in the region.⁴³

Not only did the Soviets begin attacking the Islamic institutions and religious leaders, but they also went after mountain princes, *kulaks* (meaning fist, or the powerful in villages), and *abreks*. In only three territories in the North Caucasus: Kuban, Stavropol *krai*, and Terek, which included the Chechen capital Grozny, Vladikavkaz, and Kizlan, there were counted 124 gangs (with 5,000 people), armed with 86 machine guns, 2,797 bayonets, and one artillery gun. It was observed that the “bandit gangs were seen in almost all places,” striking against party and soviet workers, holding up trains, and kidnapping passengers for ransom.⁴⁴

To fight the sheikhs and bandits, in August 1920, the Soviets held a party meeting that was led by A.M. Stopany of the Caucasus Army. A resolution was created declaring, “this is an important political moment and the menacing bandits throughout the area are dangerous and have unorganized power in towns. *Revkom* needs to intensify its army section and needs to introduce structure to fight them.” In the *oblasts* and *gubernaias* were set up administrations of *Revkom* that communicated between each other about attacks by the bandit groups relaying information as to how many were in the groups, what weapons they had, and their attack sequences, amongst other things. *Revkom* in the Terek *oblast*, was attacked repeatedly by as many as 150 horsemen at one time. In the countryside, villages and *stanitsas* appealed to the authorities to help contain the violence and destruction that was occurring. The Kuban *stanitsa* leader wrote for help saying, “(Help) is extremely necessary against this type of force, of which *Revkom* should be leaned upon to give, in all times to defend *stanitsas* from the raids of the bandits.”⁴⁵

To that end, in May 1921 the North Caucasus War *okrug* (district), or the SKVO, was created and headed by the future People’s Commissar Kliment Voroshilov. At the beginning it included, the Don Region, Kuban and Terek Cossacks, and the Stavropol region. By the end of 1921, Dagestan and Chechen-Ingushetia were included into it. The tasks of the commanders were to carry out commands of the Communist party and Soviet government, expand the Red Army presence in the region, strengthen the discipline in its soldiers, be regularly prepared politically and militarily, and to help in the work to liquidate *banditizm* and

the Muslim rebels. To do this, the Red Army sent four Petrograd Cavalry battalions, six Chongarsky Rifle battalions, fourteen Maikop Rifle battalions, other battalions from the Don, Krasnodar, and Cherkessia, and twenty-eight Mountain Rifle battalions to the war district. As the fighting spread deep into the forests, bands began to raid *stanitsas* and villages, holding up trains, and in some cases terrorizing the population. In the summer and fall of 1921 throughout the Don, Kuban, and Terek areas bands ran free only to be put down harshly when found by the numerically superior Red Army and GRU (main foreign military intelligence directorate) soldiers.⁴⁶

Interestingly enough, the achievements of the Bolsheviks in the North Caucasus at this time can be explained because of the support and assistance they got from former leaders of *abrek* gangs and gifted partisans with names such as, Kara-Karayvim, Hirim Kupinsky, and Kachak-Omar. Many of these men had personal vendettas or blood feuds to finish, along with the ideals that the “enemy of my enemy is my friend,” and that less competition means more spoils.⁴⁷ The fight against the bandits had an effect, and by 1921-1922 they began to move in smaller groups of ten to twenty armed with handguns, performing ambushes, and raiding Soviet establishments. The bandits were particularly distinguished in the Kymsko-Loovskii and Staro-Abybvskii *auls*, but the GRU was skillfully and methodically hampering activities in most of the SKVO. For example, the autumn of 1921 brought the final blow to the unified gangs of bandits in the Kuban *oblast*, as the Soviets reported that all had been liquidated from the area. Whether this means all were killed, or they simply moved to another region, was left to discussion, but the fact was banditry was waning. They then moved operations into the Stavropol region where the bands suffered huge losses. In December 1921, the newspaper “Mountain Truth,” reported that units of the Caucasus *diviziya* (division) and outlaws clashed, ending with the liquidation of the bandits. There were outbreaks reported up to this time, but all were subsequently put down, and the “counter-revolutionaries” were not able to move openly against the power of the Soviets.⁴⁸

A Comparison

There is a strong parallel between the Chechen’s blood feud and Sicily’s ties of honor of blood, which gave birth to the Mafia. In both cases, they are much firmer than any obligation to the state. All this is the result of the fact that the only institution in the Sicilian

conscience that really counted was the family. But it counted more as a juridical contract of bond than as a natural association based on affection. Much like in Chechnya, the family was the Sicilian's government because a centralized state was extraneous to them, and was viewed merely as outsiders coming in and taking control by force. When they do come in, whether it is the Russians or the Italians, they are simply an entity imposing taxes, military service, war, and bringing in outside policing agents. In dispersed communities such as Chechnya and Sicily, as discussed earlier, the idea of blood revenge is to deter the first blow, but it does not stop crime. Lawlessness, nurtured by the lack of central authority and the tolerance of a culture of violence, fills in the gaps of the tight-knit, clannish communities.⁴⁹

In the protection racket, something both Chechens and Sicilians excelled at, the family also embodied the typical protection agreement in its simplest form in that men are expected to protect weaker members, who in exchange accept the high price of submitting to the will of their protectors. A good example of a nineteenth-century city that rivalled Grozny in such crime was Olivara, Sicily. Here the markets had their own network of buyers and sellers, and as the economy increased substantially the families regulated the town's wholesale markets by overseeing transactions, setting prices, running auctions, guaranteeing quality, enforcing promises, imposing obligations, and even guarding laborers from exploitation and abuse. There is also evidence of the presence of "natural" alliances, and groupings among families. What is more, if there were certain feuds between families in peacetime they diminished in war-time alliances. Lastly, when there was peace the balance of power rested in the city where the money and goods were located, but when conflict or danger erupted, the demand for the resources of the country, especially safe refuge in small villages, suddenly rose.⁵⁰

On 17 March 1861 the kingdom of Italy was proclaimed under Emmanuel II. Sicilians, for their part, took little pleasure in this. Much like Chechens, their religion was different than Romans as it remained a medieval type of Christianity and rarely did they venture far from home, except on religious holidays. In an attempt to consolidate Italian power in Sicily and to rid the area of French and British influence, famous Republican Giuseppe Garibaldi landed there with a thousand Republican soldiers, and pushed the two foreign powers out of the region. He eventually annexed the sulfur-rich island with a referendum that ninety-nine percent of Sicilians passed. A year later, in 1862, he also legislated the closing of all monasteries in the area, and the confiscation of their property, and

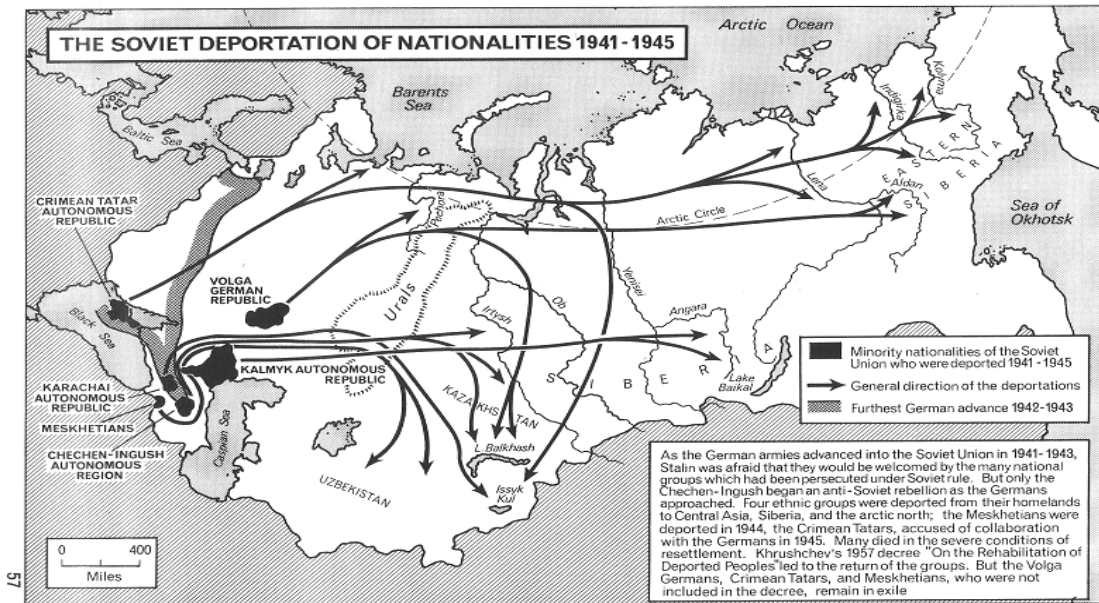
riots had to be put down ruthlessly by the *carabinieri* (police) and army troops. He then conscripted men into the army to unite Italy.⁵¹ As will be seen, not only was this how Imperial Russia behaved in the region, but the Soviets will come in and try to completely shut down mosques and holy places.

Earlier, in the 1830's, Italian Republican Giuseppe Mazzini, went to prison for Carbonari activities. His main goal was to unify Italy. He set up the "Young Italy Society," a guerrilla group of young men loyal to one leader, whose tactics included, assassination, kidnapping, going after political officials, policemen, and informers. Authorities called it a secret society, and the crimes they committed *pani*, or bread, because that is what the group was supposed to live on. In a historical twist, the legacy of the society resonated with many in Sicily, and for the next fifty years kidnappings, assassinations, and raids on Republican garrisons by small gangs of riders on horseback were common in the countryside. Much like *abreks*, the "hill bandits" acquired a glamorous image, one of the most famous being Leone the "bandit king," who was a Robin-Hood figure known for kidnapping rich people for ransom. In 1876, his small band of men, many of whom would be the original Sicilian Mafioso, kidnapped a 22-year old businessman named John Rose, whose parents were wealthy bankers. They proceeded to take him to a cave and demanded a 5,000 pound ransom. When the mother refused to pay after two letters because she felt that would make them easy targets, Leone cut off one of the captive's ears, and sent it to the family. When they still refused, he sent the second ear, and threatened that the nose was next. The parents paid the ransom, and although many in the community were disgusted by the vulgarity of the actions, people still went to Palermo to "peer sideways and study these swaggering Mafiosi, with their curt jargon of speech, rakish set of hat, and long locks of hair."⁵²

From the time of Russian development in the Northern Caucasus, to the final Soviet consolidation in 1922, two specifically different movements came to the forefront that would eventually meld together to fight against Russian and Soviet expansion: the *abreks* and the Sufi Brotherhoods (*tariqas*). There has always been a tradition of *banditizm* in Islam, especially against foreign powers, and the Sufism that took hold in Chechnya was essential to the anti-colonial movement. Although, generally speaking, *abreks* were outlaws, what the Russian empire did was make believers into outlaws. By criminalizing *zikr*, authorities attacked many individuals and groups of believers, forcing them into outright rebellion or to

go underground. In this sense, many in the Naqshbandi and Qadiriya *tariqas* either joined bands of *abreks* or became *abreks* themselves, collaborating to hurt the intruders however possible, whether through kidnappings (economics and fear), attacking party members and meetings (political), or fighting the Red Army, the OGPU, or the GRU (physical war). A scholar of Dagestan, Robert Chenciner, argued that because of the economic cooperation with *abreks*, as well as the political and social honor and violent reprisals of earlier deeds, the Sufi brotherhoods could be likened to the “nineteenth-century Sicilian Mafia.”⁵³ At the end of 1922 into the beginning of 1923, as will be discussed next chapter, Stalin will launch a new anti-Islamic campaign throughout the Soviet Union, making the Naqshbandi and Qadiriya brotherhoods illegal, forcing the true adherents into going underground and becoming common criminals.

Map 2: The Deported Nations (1941-1945)



Chapter 4: The Soviets, Nationalities, and the Brotherhoods

After his 1919 visit to the North Caucasus and his approval of the Mountain Republic, Joseph Stalin considered what type of government should be set up in the region after the Civil War. His arguments were centered on the type of administrative and political autonomy the region should have. He struggled with how to divide the territory as well, whether it be based on national or ethnic interests. One thing he did know was that the area was filled with political criminals, and that his main goal was in “eliminating backwardness (economic, political, cultural), which has been inherited from the past in order to give them the opportunity to catch up.”¹ Although Lenin was more worried about mobilizing the worker’s movements on the peripheries, Stalin was intrigued by what the Soviets could do with the many nationalities under their power. In his *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question*, he argued that the nation was a historical, stable community of people formed by a common language, economy, territory, and a psychology demonstrated in a common culture. In essence, he claimed that the Soviets would divide nations into autonomous, self-governing units, with freedom and equality of languages, and the protection of their rights. He added, that if a nation would like to separate from the Soviet Union then that was their right. But he also warned if a national consciousness should turn into combative nationalism that would run counter to the establishment of socialism it would be put down. As he stated, “The right of divorce is not an invitation for all wives to leave their husbands.”²

Lenin did not have much of an answer for Islam in particular, and his stance on religion was two-faced. In his famous 1905 article in the newspaper *Novaya Zhizn* (New Life), he wrote that religion was a private affair, and that everyone should be free to profess any religion, or no religion at all. With this in mind, a complete separation of church and state was needed. In the same article though, he also argued that it was a form of spiritual oppression that held the masses down, and kept them isolated and impotent. In his famous quote, he went on to say that “Religion is opium for the people. Religion is a sort of spiritual booze, in which the slaves of capital drown their human image, their demand for a life more or less worthy of man.”³

Four years later, Lenin wrote that Social-Democracy (Socialism) and religion were inconsistent with each other, and a good Marxist should know how to combat religion. This will become known as “scientific atheism.” In order to make religion disappear, one must

include it in the concrete practice of the class movement thus making it material and not spiritual. When studying religion scientifically, one sees that the most religious are the downtrodden of society; or the fearful working masses. Fear makes religion, and what is needed is to lift up the working class and religion will disappear. Fighting capitalism is fighting religion, and it needs to be organized, united, and consciously planned. A good Marxist is a materialist, an enemy of religion, and not in an abstract way. A materialist fights religion in a concrete way, “on the basis of the class struggle which is going on in practice and is educating the masses more and better than anything else could.”⁴

Religion and the Secret Police

During the Civil War the Bolsheviks proved capable of getting many Chechens and other North Caucasians to fight for the Red Army by temporarily accommodating Islam. But once the war was over, the Communist Party began to crush political opposition in all of Russia, and this meant attacking the still heavily-armed bands of *abreks* and sheikhs. Beginning in 1923, Stalin launched a large, successful anti-Islam campaign in the region. Mosques were destroyed by the thousands, clerics were hunted, arrested, and liquidated as ‘saboteurs.’ As will be seen, it was not completely successful, but the devastation was palpable. In 1920 there were 30,000 mosques in the region, by 1941 only 1000 remained. Likewise, all 14,500 *madrassahs* (religious schools) were shut down, and of the 47,000 clerics in the region only 2,000 remained alive.⁵

Stalin’s methods drove the *tariqas* underground, and a small anti-Bolshevik movement began to form. By the early 1920’s, many ethnic Russians and Cossacks living in the region complained to Moscow that they were being murdered and raided by North Caucasian *banditz*. The groups were reportedly “terrorizing the Russian population in the area beyond endurance,” and mullahs and sheikhs were at the head of many of these bands. Although they had been diminished in numbers, there were still 1250 mullahs, 34 sheikhs, and another 250 religious elders in what was now called the *Gorskaya* (Mountain) Republic. They had also managed to keep alive the illegal *sharia* courts that were masked as “reconciliation commissions.” Although outright rebellion would come later, it was enough that Stalin sent the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the USSR, Mikhail Kalinin, down to the region to stem the tide.⁶

What did occur was a considerable growth in banditry and sabotage in the region. Many in the area were broke and unable to find work in the post-war society when production was at its lowest. As was the custom, people soon filled this void with banditry. In response to more Soviet presence, there was a considerable rise in sabotage against the Party machine in order to destabilize the region, starve the population, and push them to physical depletion so the locals would see the Bolsheviks as enemies. Sensing this, Stalin quickly labeled any act directed towards the overthrow, undermining, or weakening of the peasants' and workers' party as counter-revolutionary crimes. He also dealt with the undermining of state industry, transportation, trade, monetary circulation, and cooperatives. To stem outright rebellion, he sent the OGPU (the secret police) in to "unite all revolutionary powers of the republics for the purpose of combating political and economic counter-revolution, espionage, and banditry" and empowered them to punish by shooting, "all persons apprehended while participating in a banditry raid or armed robbery."⁷

Another crime that the Soviets codified was that of hooliganism. There is not a western equivalent to the idea, but it was defined as "intentional actions violating public order in a coarse manner and expressing clear disrespect toward society." These acts would include carrying a weapon (almost every Chechen had at least one), screaming in public, domestic abuse, or any type of anti-Soviet activity. In the North Caucasus, almost ninety percent of all acts of hooliganism were committed while the perpetrator was intoxicated. Added to this, was the fact that after the war in rural, peasant areas crime rates of violence, and theft of socialist properties were higher than in urban areas. According to the State, there were three main reasons for this. Firstly, people in rural areas had everyday access to government property with fewer government officials to oversee them. Secondly, peasants had an acute need for grain for their illegal, privately owned animals and could very rarely gain this legally. Lastly, the Soviet authorities claimed that it was just a manifestation of traditional peasant practices of salvaging and keeping anything they saw lying around.⁸

One more phenomena that the Civil War created throughout the Soviet Union were the *bezprizorniki*, or "roofless ones." In 1921, it was estimated that there were over four million orphans and homeless children throughout the Soviet Union displaced after the war. They were a rag tag bunch that travelled in "unruly and larcenous" packs inspiring fear and panic in many places, especially in the peripheral republics, *oblasts*, and large cities. It was estimated

that six to seven percent of all criminal convictions in the Union at this time involved the homeless juveniles.⁹ The head of the Cheka (the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for the Suppression of Counterrevolution, Sabotage, and Speculation), Felix Dzerzhinsky, took a special interest in these young gangs not only because they were taxing the finances and manpower of the security services, but also as a way of recruiting. He set up children's homes throughout the North Caucasus, and other regions, and raised the young criminals into agents for the Cheka (later renamed the GPU, OGPU, NKVD, and KGB). He took the hardened young men who had to struggle to survive, and isolated from the rest of society, a society they viewed with suspicion and animosity, and turned them into enforcers for the government.¹⁰ This will be important to the North Caucasus because from the early 1920's on, there will be a strong police presence in the region.

In an authoritarian state, whether it be Tsarist Russia or the Soviet Union, a state secret police is essential. Interestingly enough, the Tsarist precursor to the Cheka (created by Vladimir Lenin on 20 December 1917), was the Tsarist secret police created by Ivan the Terrible in the mid-sixteenth. The men who were tasked with upholding the Tsar's newly formed police state were called the *oprichnina* (deriving from apart, or separate). They were clad in black from head to toe, rode black horses, and were encouraged to commit crimes in order to subdue the population. In the late-nineteenth century, Tsar Nicholas II created another organ of the secret police called the *okhrana* (guard, or security). They were tasked with combating terrorism and left-wing revolutionary activity. Whether it be the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union, both the Tsars and the Bolsheviks feared their subjects, and their real aim was mass terror to prevent uprisings and assassinations. The Cheka, and all of its later reincarnations so closely resembled the *oprichniki*, that many began calling their agents "*oprichniks*" out of earshot.¹¹ Lenin's ideal for the Cheka, was to make it the armed vanguard of the party in its struggle against counter-revolutionaries, speculation, and sabotage. As former KGB member Vladimir Kuzichkin wrote in his memoirs, "We were the sword that destroyed and punished the enemies of the Revolution and the people."¹²

However, the Cheka was much more efficient than the *oprichnina* or *okhrana*. The "clean hands of the Chekist," of which Dzerzhinsky bragged about, were not idle. Under the Tsars, between 1821 and 1906, 997 criminals had been executed, and these men had mainly been serial murderers. From the years 1917 and 1923, under the Cheka, more than one-

million persons were executed by shooting, and in a particular span of one and one-half days, the Chekists executed more people than in the last eighty-five years of the Tsarist regime.¹³ Between 1917 and 1920, the Cheka in Moscow alone had destroyed fifty-nine counterrevolutionary organizations, including twenty-two White Guard factions, twelve Right-wing Social Revolutionaries, fourteen Left-wing Social Revolutionaries, three Mensheviks, one Anarchist, five underground anarchists, and two maximalist (Social Revolutionary splinter) organizations.¹⁴

Lenin and Stalin were quick to use the weapon in the North Caucasus. In 1921, a year before the Civil War ended and the Bolsheviks consolidated their power, they were already arresting counter-revolutionaries, spies, criminals, deserters, and *banditz*. According to the GPU created in 1922, in the Mountain Republic (Chechnya, Dagestan, Terek, Stavropol *krai*, and others) alone there were 11,270 arrests. A year later, in the newly renamed North Caucasus military region there were 15,558 arrests by the secret police, and another 304 by the local authorities. The number jumped to 18,442 two years later, and would remain steady for the next couple of years until the Chechens were finally divided from the rest of the North Caucasus.¹⁵

The OGPU and Chechnya

Stalin dealt with the nationalities question simply: he divided to weaken and conquered. Chechnya was no exception. In 1922, the year the USSR was officially created, the Soviets split the Chechens from the rest of the North Caucasus by creating the Chechen Autonomous *Oblast*. Much of this had to do with the fact that it was still a heavily armed society with *abreks* and *tariqas* fighting the Red Army and the secret police. The OGPU, created in 1923, counted some eight to ten thousand *murids* in the *oblast* and their preference for isolation was drawing them further away from the center. That year the anti-Islam campaign that was launched in the North Caucasus abolished all *sharia* courts. During that winter the Red Army began disarming the population and liquidating the “bandit’s nests” of Naqshbandi and Qadiriya guerrilla fighters in the mountains. In April 1924, the most wanted sheikh Ali Mitaev, was arrested as a counter-revolutionary, clerical bourgeois. Three years later he was tried and executed in Rostov.¹⁶

In the mountain *auls*, counter-revolutionary bands of *abreks* and *tariqas* began forming, accumulating weapons and ammunition from the English by way of Turkey and Iran. Sensing a brewing rebellion in 1925, Stalin sent in 6,857 OGPU troops, armed with 130 heavy-caliber machine-guns, along with eight bombers, and artillery. According to I.S. Unshlikht, Deputy Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council of the USSR, the mission was to “carry out the disarming of the populace and the removal of bandit elements.” In consequence, 242 *auls* were raided, 101 were subjected to artillery fire, and 16 were bombarded from the air. Six Chechens were killed, thirty were wounded, and 119 houses of bandits were blown up. In addition, twelve “bandit elements” were killed, five were wounded, and another 39 leaders were arrested, along with hundreds of other individuals. Eventually 105 were executed before the investigations were concluded, and another 21 were sent into exile. The OGPU also confiscated 25,299 rifles, 4,319 revolvers, 75,566 bullets, a Lyons machine-gun, and Morse-Code and telephone equipment.¹⁷

In the same operation, and after being hunted for almost two years, Nadzhmuddin “the Devil” Gozinky of Hotso and two other Naqshbandi were captured and executed. According to the OGPU, the sheikh was handed over in the village of Dai, but not before fierce fighting, the taking of all the village elders, artillery fire, and the dropping of twenty-two *poods* (a *pood* is a little over 35 pounds) of bombs. In Chekist fashion, he and Sheikh Amin of Ansalta were quickly shot on the orders of the war-field court. Nadzhmuddin and the infamous Uzun-Hajji had a small army of 10,000 *murids* during the Civil War that was one of the fiercest fighting forces in the North Caucasus, and the Bolsheviks never forgot them. Meanwhile, the purging of “bandit elements” within the party and revolutionary committees were being organized from the populace of sympathizers.¹⁸

Those who could get away moved into Dagestan, and a year after the completion of the Chechen operation, the disarmament of the mountains of Dagestan commenced. It was a rainy fall, and the trackers had problems following the small gangs who knew the terrain better. In one particular excursion, the 84th Infantry Regiment of the Red Army was tasked with finding the famous *abrek* Rakhiman. They went from *aul* to *aul* in a sweeping movement, and even caught up with him one night, only to be left behind as the gang moved while the army rested. The next morning they reached the *aul* of Kashkar, and went to visit the local Soviet chairman. In what would become a way of staying alive for many Soviet

citizens, the chairman told the army where Rakhiman was hiding, and that if they caught him, other bandits would give up as well. They knocked on his door, and after minutes of silence, the door flew open with Rakhiman standing in the doorway. At that moment, three bandits jumped out of the side windows and began firing on the Red troops. The *abrek* tried to use the diversion to get away, but he was soon caught, and shot in the street. All the other bandits were arrested.¹⁹ No matter the efforts though, *banditz* were not completely eradicated from the region, the OGPU assessed stocks of firepower at 100,000 barrels of ammo (probably an exaggeration), and 60,000 arms. In an interesting historical turn, many of the weapons that were confiscated had been given legally to the “Red Partisans” to fight the Whites during the Civil War.²⁰

What was important to Stalin, and therefore the OGPU, was the fight against so-called “social aliens” and “socially dangerous elements.” By this time, they had been instructed to hunt down any anti-Soviet, counter-revolutionaries in the towns and villages. Many persons could fall under these categories. For example, Tsarist loyalists; national anti-Soviet political parties; and anti-party counter-elements, also known as Trotskyists. Terrorists groups or terrorists who work alone; and perhaps most importantly to the Northern Caucasus, clergy and all religious leaders, or those who work in confessionals, preachers or heads of gatherings of religious leaders and sectarian organizations.²¹

The Cheka, or any of its later incarnations, were the only organs of Soviet power to have unlimited power. Lenin, Stalin, and men after them all looked to the secret police as a weapon of arbitrary mass terror, and the means of not only annihilating actual enemies of the regime, but also as a warning to any who might be tempted to oppose it at any time. As famed Chechen historian Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov wrote in exile in Paris during Stalin’s regime:

The Stalinist regime is held together...by the organization and technical skill of the Soviet political police force, in which Stalin himself plays the role of first policeman...To say the NKVD is the state secret police conveys very little...To say that the NKVD is a “state within a state” underestimates its importance, for the question posed allows the presence of two forces: that of the normal state and that of the supernormal NKVD, or universal Chekism: state and party Chekism, collective and individual Chekism; Chekism in theory and daily life; Chekism from top to bottom in social life.²²

To this end, in June 1927 the Party came up with a criminal code discussing what constituted a crime, and what the penalties were for said crimes. Some of the crimes that pertained to the Chechen *oblast* were as follows. Statute 58-1 discussed counterrevolutionaries who directed all their actions towards undermining or weakening the power of the workers-peasants, and to disassembling the main economic, political, and national proletarian revolution. These criminals could also be punished for taking up arms against the Red Army, and punished by confiscation of all material wealth. In situations when said criminals ran, and either his family helped or knew about it and did not tell the authorities they forfeited their freedom for five to ten years, and all their property was confiscated. Statute 58-2 dealt with armed uprisings, especially instigated by armed bands (*abreks* and *tariqas*), on Soviet territory with the intent of capturing power in the center or local areas with the goal of violently seizing territory, or working with foreign governments. Shooting at or announcing oneself as an enemy of the worker's party would result in either being shot, or complete confiscation of property and no less than thirty to forty years in prison. Lastly, Statute 58-8 deliberated on terrorist acts directed against the consolidation of Soviet power or the people's revolution worker and peasant's organizations. Any person who participated fully in such action, at least in name, even if they did not belong to a counterrevolutionary organization, would still get all confiscation of property, a prison term of forty years, and no less than thirty.²³

Stalin's political prowess was proven in the North Caucasus later that year in what became known as the "Shakhty Case." In late 1927, the OGPU representative in the region, Yefim Georgievich Yevdokimov, had presented Vyacheslav Menzhinsky, the head of OGPU, with a secret document alledging an illegal counterrevolutionary sabotage group in the city of Shakhty, a city northwest of Grozny near Rostov-on-Don. The report indicated that engineers in a mine were planning to wreck them systematically, but the Lubyanka (OGPU) headquarters were skeptical. Unfortunately for Yevdokimov, much of his information was letters he confiscated from the engineers written in code. When he took the letters to Menzhinsky, in true Cheka style, the leader told Yevdokimov he had two weeks to decode the letters or be arrested himself for sabotage. Although Stalin just represented the Party Central Committee on the OGPU board, and was not yet the leader of the Communist Party, Yevdokimov went to him to apply pressure on the Chairman of the People's Commissar,

Alexei Rykov. Instead of asking for evidence, Stalin told Yevdokimov to, “Go back to the North Caucasus and immediately adopt whatever measures you consider necessary. From now on send all your information to me only, and we will take care of Comrade Menzhinsky ourselves.”²⁴

With this movement, Stalin had become morally responsible to see the Shakhty case to its fruition. He entrusted Yevdomikov with the investigation who passed it down to his assistant DI Kursky, who was ordered to obtain “sincere confessions” from the accused persons. Kursky had already made a name for himself in the OGPU, and was considered gifted in the ways of obtaining information, meaning he was an expert in torture. Before the official investigation began, Kursky’s methods proved invaluable, and the accused confessed to a litany of crimes that went past being saboteurs. All of the dozen or so engineers who were accused of counterrevolution were “liquidated,” and Stalin showed that he was masterful at the public annihilation of all enemies of the regime, whether imaginary or real. Yevdomikov received two Orders of the Red Banner, was made a member of the Party Central Committee, and was appointed First Secretary of the North Caucasus District Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (a very rare distinction). Kursky became an “Honorary Chekist” and would be well known for his services until 1936 when he supposedly committed suicide for “losing his nerve” when Stalin’s Great Terror was unleashed in the region.²⁵

Collectivization and the Rise of Banditry

Lenin envisioned that once a stateless society was created there would be no reason for laws, and crime would inevitably disappear. In the Party’s 1919 platform, it was argued that people would grow accustomed to obeying society’s rules without fear of punishment. Crime was a disease of the old society, and the occasional infraction would be dealt with on the local level (much like *adat*). A New World Order was to be created without government, courts, jails, or police. But by 1929, Stalin ruled over a land that was not crimeless, and used the consolidation of the dictatorship to create laws to deal with his political enemies and peasant hoarders of state property. By this time there were three types of crimes: ordinary crimes, economic crimes of a socialist nature, and crimes against the state. In 1927, the death penalty was authorized for ex-tsarist police or those who had been anti-Bolsheviks during the

Civil War. Five years later, the death penalty was specified for anyone stealing property. That same year it was written that if a Red Army soldier were to flee, his family would be internally exiled, and he would be exiled, or put to death. There were also vague laws put into place for lesser crimes that “prohibited” trade, and prostitution, but the punishment was not clearly defined.²⁶

There were reasons for Stalin’s draconian measures as crimes against the state in the late 1920’s skyrocketed. High party officials in the North Caucasus were shocked and unprepared to deal with the massive amounts of theft to state property, political murders, train derailments and robberies, black market activities, and the hooliganism of the *bezprizorniki*. The authorities distinguished between *stikhiinost’* (disobedience), and *soprotivlenie* (opposition). It was disobedience that Stalin himself feared the most believing it posed a threat to the Soviet’s political and economic order, which in turn meant the stability of the regime. Speculators and black markets popped up everywhere, but no type of crime threatened the state’s interest more than banditry, a crime the Chechens excelled at. According to 1932 police reports in both the Urals and Northern Caucasus, these armed gangs were difficult to identify, trace, and eliminate. Their members often had family ties and resided in the areas where they operated, and as a result the local non-Russian population not only protected the identity of the gangs, but also provided the bandits with information about police movements. It got so bad that a March 1935 plenum of the Soviet Supreme Court referred to banditry as one of the most “acute” forms of class war “directed against Socialist property and administrative order.”²⁷

Places like Grozny, an industrialized oil town with workers settled from all parts of the Soviet Union, became dangerous to walk the streets at night. Robberies, murders, drunken fights, and random attacks on citizens were common, as well as ethnic conflicts at worksites and barracks of mixed ethnicities. One common place that had an array of speculators, black marketers selling items from flowers to fruits, and common thieves, was the train station. Gangs of robbers preyed on recent arrivals, would-be travelers trying to get tickets, and other pickpockets trying to do the same. One station in the region was described as “more like a flophouse than a decent station.”²⁸

This type of criminality was not something Stalin tolerated and the main reason for his attempt at crushing all “enemies of the state” was due to the fact that in 1928 he started the

“Revolution from Above.” His first Five-Year Plan was a rapid industrialization and collectivization of agriculture to catch the Soviet Union up with the West. In numerical terms, the plan called for a 250 percent increase in industrial development and a 330 percent increase in heavy industries alone. In an effort to improve productivity in the agricultural sector, he created collective farms and moved the individual farmers onto them forcibly.²⁹ The collective farms were called *kolkhozes*, and immediately there was resistance to the forced move. Throughout the Soviet Union, peasants began burning their crops and slaughtering animals as opposed to having to compulsorily give livestock to the Party. In addition, in 1931-32 there was a massive drought, and regions such as Ukraine, the Northern Caucasus, and Siberia were devastated by it. An April 1932 letter to Ordzhonikidze from one of Stalin’s close friends, V. Feigin, described the Western Siberia region, but it could be discussing numerous areas of the Soviet Union. Feigin wrote there were two types of *kolkhozes*: those that were fairly productive, and those that produced nothing. In a region that was known for its milk, three-quarters of the milk cows had died in just three years. But perhaps most importantly to the Party, and an issue that will become volatile in Chechnya, was that of the peasant’s attitude. Feigin wrote, “Their attitude is utterly bad in light of the famine and the fact that they are losing their cows through contracting—as a result the *kolkhoznik* has neither bread nor milk. I saw all this with my own eyes and I am not exaggerating. People are starving...and naturally under such circumstances, their mood is hostile.”³⁰

Even before the famine, *kolkhozes* in Chechnya were dealing with *razbazarivanie*, or the massive destruction or illegal selling of state property. The main target was livestock, which came as no surprise as horses and cows were highly valuable commodities and could be exchanged on the black market easily. One of the most important and oft-committed crimes was that of horse stealing. This was a matter of economic calculation as many believed that if they were going to lose everything they may as well go to the collective with cash; a way of keeping what is theirs against the Party’s wishes. In late 1929, in the Terskii Okrug Northwest of Grozny, according to the OGPU, the bazaars were “bursting” with livestock. Here a workhorse cost 10 to 15 rubles, and a cow 10 to 20 rubles depending on the state of the animal. Speculators would buy the cows there and transport them to Moscow or other large cities where a horse could sell for 250, and a cow for 125 to 150 rubles. Added to

this, many peasants labeled *kulaks* (well-to-do-peasants, or capitalists) by the authorities were breaking up machinery claiming it was deficient. Soviet officials described these acts as conscious “wrecking” and “sabotaging” rather than the results of poor machinery, neglect, mistakes, or ignorance of technology.³¹

Arrests and prosecutions followed. In 1934, Stalin called for a “mini” terror in the Chechen *oblast* that would reach most of the North Caucasus. In the *oblast* itself, with a population nearing five-hundred thousand, 224 *kulaks*, 112 “middle” peasants, 20 “poor” peasants, 18 “anti-Soviets,” 29 criminals, and another 86 were arrested for crimes ranging from being a “*kulak* terrorist,” to a brigand, a thief, or a criminal gangster. Bands of *abreks* and *tariqas* began attacking collective and state farms, and assaults of Soviet officials skyrocketed.³² A bit earlier, from 1929-1930, the OGPU shot more than 300 Naqshbandi and Qadiriya for crimes ranging from counterrevolution, anti-Soviet predilections, or being members of illegal religious sects. In the next decade alone, deportations, arrests, and shootings would claim five percent of the entire Chechen *oblast*’s population.³³

The mini terror occurred in large part because of a 1932-33 anti-Soviet uprising in Chechnya. Collectivization combined with famine created a tenuous hold on power for the Soviet apparatus. The drought in 1931 in the Urals and Siberia created a situation where their quotas for grain were lowered, and the onus to make up for it was put on Ukraine and the North Caucasus. To do this, the Party began taking grain from the *kolkhozes* and other places by force. As things got worse, *kolkhozes* were taxed and stripped of everything until there was nothing left. Riots, protesting, and the attacking of Party officials began, and the people involved were quickly labeled *kulaks*, enemies of the state, and “illegal criminals with reductionist tendencies.”³⁴

Just before the uprisings and subsequent violence, on 2 August 1931, the Central Committee passed a resolution that collectivization was fundamentally complete in the North Caucasus. In November 1932, Stalin’s notorious terror operative, Matvei Shkiriyatov, was appointed the chairman of the commission to purge the North Caucasus of “people hostile to Communism conducting a *kulak* policy.” By January, the Don, Kuban, and North Caucasus were declared under a special military emergency on the pretext of a cholera outbreak. This was an excuse to control the region. In February, the North Caucasus were placed under their own special commission, and Shkiriyatov gave the OGPU and local police the power, “to

exact compulsory labor, and to evict, deport, and punish even with death, the illegal resisters to collectivization.”³⁵

Despite the heavy police presence, criminal acts against the state flourished. Not only was sabotage of equipment an everyday occurrence, but purposeful failure to harvest crops, and outright armed resistance against the party soviets, *kolkhozes*, and *komsomols* (youth organizations) became the norm. A fierce uprising in Nozhai-Yurtovsky, Chechnya, for example, lasted for three days, and an unknown number of resisters were killed. There are no official numbers, but observers believed it to be in the high twenties. There were also two effective ways of resisting without violence: not showing up for work, or “filching” harvested grain and hiding it in pits. In the spring of 1932, at the Timoshevsky station near Krasnodar, where all the peoples of the North Caucasus went through, there was found 428 pits of stashed grains with a total of over 100 kilos of harvested grain procured. *Sovnarkom*, the state apparatus in charge of running the internal affairs of the Union, declared a fight against armed *kulaks*, simple criminals (*abreks*), parasites, and counterrevolutionaries. In addition to the presence in Chechnya of Shkiryatov, the OGPU, and *Sovnarkom*, the regional control commission of the North Caucasus (SKVKP) certified, “with resolve to begin an offensive against the *kulaks*, counterrevolutionaries, and anti-communal elements. Vowing to demolish resistance of anyone partial to that side going against communist and to guarantee to fulfill the bread procurement goals, and to fight until successful in the liquidation of *kulak* sabotage.”³⁶

The Chechen-Ingush *obkom* also got in on the act. Two meetings were held in December 1933 and January 1934, in order to come up with ways to stop criminality against the state. They discussed the deficiencies within the party in confronting the *kulaks* and bandits. Their solution was to enroll the masses from the villages, and all workers to unite against the “*kulak-mullah*” elements (meaning they classified land-owning peasants and religious leaders in the same category of criminals), as well as their “agents, leftist opportunists, the Great Power (the West) chauvinists, and local nationalists.”³⁷ Anyone who did not succumb to collectivization was a counterrevolutionary element, and therefore went directly against the interests of the Soviet Union. These organized “political *banditz*” were hard to find because the *kulaks* and spiritual leaders often hid them, or were the actual lawbreakers themselves. For example, in 1932 in the Vedensko *raion*, the *Selsoviet* (village soviet) encountered a small cell that tried to kidnap the party head of the *raion*. Although

these men were found out, and punished, it rattled the party members in the area as the political *banditz* were combining with the “spiritual leaders who use religious fanaticism in the mountains in the interest of capitalistic elements to fight against socialist building.”³⁸

In the first four years of collectivization, the center had poured more than 2.4 million rubles into Chechnya to buy livestock, build *kolkhozes*, supply machinery, and help with harvesting. In 1932 alone, they supplied the area with more than four-hundred thousand rubles worth of livestock. But the famine, and the subsequent rebellion, made it difficult for the party and those that lived on the collective farms. The *kulaks* fought back by sabotaging the harvest machines, and the all-Russian education schools that had been built. They even had a slogan that cried, “*Kolkhozes* without communists!” and they teamed up with the mullahs to not only sabotage the schools, but conducted Arab education in the mountains, and followed the rules of *adat* within their *teips*. In 1934, it was a much discussed topic, and although three years before the Chechens were said to have been completely collectivized, it was quite apparent that local customs and religion, especially in the mountains, were still being illegally followed by a majority of the population.³⁹

In response to this open rebellion by *kulaks*, mullahs, and their agents, mass arrests became the norm. In the Nozhai-Yurtov region, about fifty miles from Grozny, men from almost every *aul* organized into an almost three-thousand strong force, and began attacking the collective farms. The NKVD called this “terrorism, and a reckless uprising of the broad masses and middle-level peasants.” They responded with the arrests of over two-thousand *kulaks*, their families, and collaborators in 1933 alone.⁴⁰

It is understandable that people were upset at the authorities and the effects that collectivization had on the region. In Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan there were reports of “edema and death from emaciation, and people have succumbed to the consumption of dogs, rats, frogs, and even cannibalism.”⁴¹ At the same time, homelessness in Chechnya, a thing that was supposed to be left in the 1920’s, grew exponentially. A 1935 state announcement claimed that seventy-five percent of the homeless were from villages, and the authorities blamed the *kulaks* for the destitute and the criminality that followed them. Mostly *bezprizorniki*, the homeless boys migrated to the cities and began roaming the streets in packs of ten to twelve. The fugitive gangs, whose members were not “socialized,” committed crimes such as petty larceny, theft, and were sometimes seen with kids as young as two to

three years old. To “liquidate” the problem, just as they did in the decade before, the government set up children labor camps throughout where the OGPU recruited the young men into a new generation of Chekists. One unnamed boy who had escaped Chechen camps on two different occasions: murdering a peasant the first time, and setting fire to a swath of buildings the second, was later recognized by an arrested man in Baku, Azerbaijan as his interrogator.⁴² The “reformed” criminals also became enforcers in prisons, and essentially the state’s best secret policemen were criminals themselves.⁴³

There were a couple different reasons for the rise in criminality, especially banditry, in regions such as the North Caucasus. Beside the idea that Chechen society was allergic to foreign influence, and there was a penchant for robbery embedded in society, there was also a lack of relations between the regular police (the detective departments and *militsiia*) and the OGPU. Relations between the two had been contentious since the early 1920’s, and the categories of crimes handled by the detectives, such as armed banditry that completely lacked any anti-Soviet political stance, were being committed by criminals who were also committing crimes against the state. Therefore, the OGPU wanted to “Chekaize” the detectives and force them to become an undercover, local police force that used the same methods as them. The problem with this was most of the local policemen were itinerant and did not report back to the center, rather they toured the countryside meting out justice on their own wanting to have no ties with the OGPU.⁴⁴

To that end, Stalin had built the power of the secret police on such a scale that it was inescapable, and often troublesome, in its attempt to bring all power to the “center.” This brought serious moral and material limitations onto law enforcers as the habit grew to look only at Moscow to solve problems, and this is exactly what Stalin wanted. That made it easier for the Party to repress the religion, culture, and traditions of peoples who were not close to the center, giving rise to dissatisfaction with the regime thereby leading to armed uprisings against them. The uprisings appeared as national-independence fights defying Soviet power, and were proclaimed by the regime as counterrevolutionary, nationalistic, and anti-Soviet. Lenin believed that eventually criminality would disappear, but it was the Party itself which created the very criminals they were trying to squash.⁴⁵

It was not just common criminals or enemies of the *kolkhozes* that were being hunted. One of Stalin’s main goals in Chechnya and Dagestan was to completely eliminate the

Naqshbandi and Qadiriya *tariqas* and their adepts. In 1926, despite great efforts, they still had a large presence in the Chechen Republic. With a population of 400,000, there were sixty-thousand *murids*; 806 mosques; 126 *mektebs* (Islamic elementary schools); and 427 *madrasahs* (schools) with 3,567 students; while the Soviets had thirty-one schools with 3,746 students. A parallel power structure to the state, especially a religious one, was not tolerated by Stalin. The *tariqas* were outlawed and persecuted, their leaders were hunted down, arrested, and liquidated as “parasites and anti-social elements,” and “spies and traitors.” By 1928, the OGPU was extremely successful as the *tariqas* and their adepts disappeared from view; forced to go underground and continue their activities clandestinely.⁴⁶

The hunting down of Islamic leaders was helped by a Presidium held by the regional committee about the shutting down of mosques, the creation of crushing taxes levied against religious bodies, fines and arrests for nonpayment, forced labor for *murids*, seizure of private property, and the confiscation of all Korans. After the meeting, a commissar wrote to the nominal head of the Party, and one of Stalin’s inner-circle Mikhail Kalinin, “The Moslem religious organizations are on the eve of complete disintegration and disappearance off the face of the earth. As of now, eighty-seven percent of Moslem centers have closed down, as have almost all mosques, and from ninety to ninety-seven percent of *mullahs* and *muezzin* (a man who calls Muslims to prayer) have been left with no means of conducting religious services.”⁴⁷

The Great Terror and the Great War

Three years before Stalin’s 1937 Great Terror, the Chechen *oblast* became the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR). This meant that the republic was lower than a union republic, but higher than an autonomous *okrug* or *oblast*. This however did not mean that the ASSR was forgotten. In 1934, the OGPU was replaced with the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs, or the NKVD, and the security service began a mission to find all enemies of the Party. The Great Terror had a public and hidden side to it. The public side were the Show Trials of old Bolsheviks, doctors, and provincial local officials. The hidden side was done through one of the most infamous of all secret Soviet decrees, no. 00447. In the preamble of the July 1937 decree, Nikolai Yezhov, the head of the NKVD, announced the operation of ridding the Union once and for all of all former *kulaks*,

criminals, and other anti-Soviet elements. These people were categorized as *kulaks* who had escaped labor camps, members of anti-Soviet parties, former tsarist officials, religious leaders, sectarian activists, bandits, recidivist thieves and swindlers, contraband smugglers, and those already in labor camps.⁴⁸

The criminals were to be further broken down into two categories: particularly active, hostile, and vicious; and hostile, but less active. In a 1937 letter from Yezhov to Stalin, there was a discussion about where the hotbeds of anti-Soviet elements were located, and what the punishment should entail. Many of the criminals moved from villages into towns bringing arms and contraband to sell on the black market. The “cadres of criminals” included, livestock raiders, thieves, and others who were able to hide in plain sight. Yezhov discussed that in July the NKVD would be prepared to deal with all the criminal contingents that were going unpunished. By that time any person in the second category would be subject to immediate arrest, sent before a three-man commission (*troika*) who would view the evidence, and then the accused would be locked in prison or sent to a gulag (labor camp) for eight to ten years. A person in the first category was to be “immediately subject to arrest, and upon examination of their doings – they are to be shot.”⁴⁹

Using the decree, the NKVD professionalized the Terror to an unprecedented degree. Deportations were quick and efficient led by enormous cohorts of well-trained security police in close cooperation with local officials. In August 1937, the POV decree (Liquidation of the Polish Sabotage-Espionage Group) targeted all groups in that area, but also began a set of decrees linked with no. 00447 targeting all of the USSR’s “diaspora nations,” or republics that were ethnically not dominated by Russians. To distinguish from the “mass operations” of the no. 00447 decree, the NKVD began calling the new movements “national operations” and targeted the usual “*kulaks*, criminals, and anti-Soviet elements.” From July 1937 to November 1938 a total of 335,513 were convicted in the “national operation,” while a total of 767,397 were convicted under the “mass operation.” Of the 681,692 executions during this period, the “national operations” made up 247,157, or thirty-six percent of that total.⁵⁰

This was dubbed the *yezhovschchina* after the leader of the NKVD, and Chechnya was not missed. The main reason for the terror was to find and punish enemies of the state and criminals, and in Chechnya there were small anti-Soviet uprisings and sabotage. The Soviets had made some inroads into society, but many non-Communist Chechens were not happy. In

1934, the Chechen and Ingush languages were assigned a common alphabet, and many local leaders were energetic about this as a step forward in setting up national worker's cadres manned by Chechen-Ingush natives. By 1936, sixty percent of all school children were enrolled in Soviet schools to prepare them to be *apparatchiks*, secretaries, or other functionaries in the party. There were seventy schools in the region for the semi-literate and illiterate to make them workers, machinists, and chemical workers. One year later, almost seventy percent of children were in a Soviet school. Since these were party-sponsored schools, the *lingua franca* was Russian, and many Chechens and Ingush took this as an affront as they did not speak Russian in their daily lives. The natives, according to the NKVD, began "to ignore and go against any measure for the building of a national proletariat, and further any clerical work in the people's tongue is to be regarded as counter-revolutionary and a sortie of a class enemy." Due to these breaches, on the night of 31 July 1937, in all villages, *raions*, and *auls*, there began a "general operation to remove all anti-Soviet elements."⁵¹

The result of this was that in one day, fourteen thousand men, or three percent of the entire population, were arrested, had their arms taken from them, and tried in absentia by a single *troika* set up by the NKVD. All were sentenced and tried as a whole either being deported or shot. In October 1937, an *obkom* meeting convened and all the members were arrested even though they were party members. For the next month, a wave of arrests occurred from the President of the Republic to village council members, and another 137 *apparatchiks* for their "bourgeois-nationalist leaning" as they were rumored to be in the process of trying to create their own republic.⁵² For the next three years, the NKVD hunted, and arrested anyone who could be considered a "bourgeois-nationalist, counterrevolutionary-insurgent, a Bukharinist-Trotskyist, or a member of an anti-Soviet sabotage organization." In all, by the end of the operation, near two-hundred thousand Chechens and Ingush suffered at the hands of the NKVD.⁵³

At this time two legal systems existed in the Soviet Union, each functioning quite independently from, and bearing little resemblance to each other. The first was the day in day out maintaining of law and order, enacting and enforcing laws, and adjudicating disputes. The second was the arbitrary and repressive system used to punish enemies of the state; the people the "operations" successfully hunted, arrested, deported, or killed. As was the case in places like Poland, Ukraine, and the North Caucasus, much of Stalin's illegal administration

was carried on outside of judicial institutions. As stated, the NKVD and Special Boards of the MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs), which were set up to facilitate campaigns against anti-Soviet elements and to silence opposition, were given extraordinary powers and were not required to follow procedure. By 1941, three and one half million people had been imprisoned, exiled, or executed in the Soviet Union, and NKVD/MVD was the largest apparatus in the USSR.⁵⁴

In his book *Lenin's Tomb*, journalist David Remnick argues that the world's largest mafia was the Soviet Communist Party, and it had its inception during the Great Terror. Stalin had guarded his monopoly on power with a sham consensus, and backed up the constitution with the NKVD, later renamed the KGB. His terror was a perfect example of criminal activity because he used violence as an instrument of coercion and discipline. There were also "made" men (*apparatchiks*, Party officials, collaborators), and an outward appearance of legitimate business (embassies, diplomats, etc.). In many ways the Great Terror was a play to gain control of the political scene and the resources of a country by eliminating any enemy that could be found, much like a prototypical mob war.⁵⁵

Although ninety-nine percent of all Chechen peasants were registered in collective farms most still maintained their private property. In 1939, in the southwestern Itum-Kale district, ninety-one percent of the cattle, and over ninety-four percent of the arable land remained in the private hands of farmers. To remedy this, the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (VKP[b]) issued a directive called, "Measures Against the Squandering of Public Lands," further enforcing collective farms in the region. The next year authorities drastically and forcefully cut individual property. In some cases, in violation of the law, they eliminated entire individual plots. These actions, plus the Great Terror, and the soon-to-be forced conscriptions into the Red Army, caused an armed rebellion that smoldered until the end of 1941 when it became a full-fledged rebellion that lasted until the end of the war.⁵⁶

In 1940, Soviet intelligence learned of a Japanese plan to utilize various Islamic "bandit" groups in Central Asia and Chechnya as fifth columnist's strikes at the Soviet rear while Japan attacked in East Asia. A fundamental part of NKVD training, especially in the "bandit nations" of Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan, focused on eradicating banditry as "the most active form of counter-revolutionary activity." These bandit nations had a few

things in common. Firstly, they were borderlands with close kinship or ethnic ties to foreign-based émigrés. Secondly, they used those foreign elements for espionage and other illegal, seditious actions against the state. Thirdly, they had a strong religious and criminal tradition, which was sustained by a “heroic” historical movement of insurrection. Lastly, they could operate on hostile terrain that facilitated concealment. In order to combat these elements, the Soviets founded the “Main Directorate for the Struggle Against Banditry,” or GUBB. This was an elite, inter-agency secret police unit created to combat the threat of foreign support for organized domestic insurgent groups, and would later lead most counter-insurgency operations in the North Caucasus.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, in preparation for the oncoming world war, the Red Army wartime labor draft was having troubles with deserters in Chechnya, and fewer people per capita volunteered for the Red Army there than in any other Republic in the Union. Per Stalin’s 1943 request, Lavrenti Beria compiled statistical information on the Chechen-Ingush ASSR during the war. Of the nearly three-quarter million people living in the Republic, fifty-three percent, or 387,000, were Chechens. Another 75,000 were Ingush, 206,000 were Russian (twenty-seven percent), and fifty-seven thousand were other. At the first mobilization in August 1941, of the eight-thousand men conscripted, 719 deserted, around nine percent. The October draft saw another 362 of 4,733 evade conscription, or a little over seven percent. By 1942, almost fifteen-thousand men had deserted, and almost ninety percent of them went into the mountains to hide, or joined gangs of *abreks*. A year later, almost seventy percent of all conscripts did not show and went into hiding. The result was this: of the 30,300 people conscripted in the Republic, 16,600 deserted, and twenty thousand of the conscripts were either Chechen or Ingush; only 4,100 actually fought for the Red Army. This meant that only twenty percent of the Chechen-Ingush population that was supposed to fight for the Red Army did. The average percentage of *dezertirsta* in the USSR was three to four percent. This led Beria to write to Stalin, “Such a high percentage of deserters in Chechnya can be explained by nothing more than the national mentality.”⁵⁸

Pavel Sudoplatov, the man who orchestrated Trotsky’s murder in Mexico, and spymaster for the Cheka to the KGB, fought the Germans in Kabardino-Balkaria and was in Tbilisi in the summer of 1942, right before the Battle of Stalingrad. In his memoirs, the spy wrote that Kabardino-Balkaria and Georgia, “were areas of ethnic unrest, but then they were

still loyal to the USSR, and the Red Army. They had skilled mountain climbers, not war tested, but with knowledge of their territory, and active support from the local population. Only in the Chechen area was the local population reluctant to cooperate with the Red Army.”⁵⁹

This however can be misleading because the Red Army dealt with dissenters of all kinds in all regions of the Union. From the start of the war to October 1941, the NKVD detained 657,364 servicemen who failed to keep up with their units or deserted. Of those, “anti-retreat forces” had detained 249,969, and NKVD blocking units the rest. In the first couple of months, the military tribunal had shot by firing squad 25,878 men for desertion, sabotage, cowardly acts, disseminators of prevocational rumors, and self-inflicted wounds.⁶⁰

Likewise, much of the blame for the Chechens and Ingush deserting the Red Army were because of government initiatives of the NKVD, GUBB, and the Red Army itself. In December 1942, the Army’s Political Directorate was warned that there were instances of unfriendly relations toward the Red Army on the part of several Caucasians. Some, the Chechens and Ingush, were considered hostile. However, Red Army political officials admitted among themselves that the soldiers were not innocent from blame as they often seized food and other provisions from the civilian population without payment; they ignored local traditions, customs, and conditions; and they did not accurately explain their “liberating mission.”⁶¹

The reaction was harsh on those who avoided the draft, went into the mountains, and then attacked the Soviets. From November 1941 to June 1943, the 141st NKVD Security Regiment in Chechnya killed 973 *banditz*, while capturing another 1,167, and arresting 1,413 “insurgent” civilian rioters and hostages taken from the family of said insurgents. The GUBB even admitted that the NKVD “excessively acted” when 213 Chechens were killed from January to June 1943 as only twenty-two were registered as *banditz* by the police. The rest were family, sympathizers, or those that hid the bandits, but had nothing to do with the armed criminal bands.⁶²

One man sent to oversee the new task was RA Rudenko, the Deputy Chief of the anti-Gang unit of the NKVD. He arrived in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR on 20 June 1943, and on his return to Moscow in August, reported to the NKVD what he had found. His report detailed the lack of control the party, the NKVD, and GUBB had on the criminal problem:

“The growth of banditry must be due to such reasons as the lack of party conduct and mass awareness among the population, especially in the mountainous areas where many villages and settlements are located far from regional centers. This lack of agents makes for the problem of gangs... This has also allowed for excesses in the conduct of military operations led by Chekists with mass arrests and killing of persons who have not been considered bandits and were not found with any incriminating or compromising evidence...”⁶³

The numbers and report are interesting for the fact that the arrests and deaths are higher than the three regions in the North Caucasus the German Wehrmacht actually occupied: the Kabardina-Balkar ASSR, Krasnodar Krai, and Stavropol Krai. There are no official reasons for this, but two are posited. One is that most insurgencies were short lived, unorganized, and occurred for the sake of escaping conscription and ridding their area of Soviets. In Chechnya however, many used the war as an excuse for plain banditry robbing farmers from rival clans, and other attacks against enemies and blood rivals. Secondly, there were in fact a high level of defectors who were cooperating with the *abreks* in the mountains. The People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs, Sultan Albogachaev, and the head of GUBB, Idris Aliev, were found guilty of cooperating with the *banditz*, and later executed. This meant that two of the top Chechens in the region working for the secret police tasked with rooting out banditry were in fact allied with them.⁶⁴

Criminality in the region had become a problem. For example, Sarali Makhmudov was twice sentenced to five year prison terms for anti-Soviet activity, and after his escape from prison in 1937 formed an armed band based out of the Southeast Mountain region of Shali, Vedeno, and Gudermes. For the next seven years, he and his cohorts left a violent wake of raids on Soviet subjects and ethnic Rूसians, including, murder, armed robbery, and terror attacks. Because the “socially hostile elements” attacked collective farms, the secret police, the Red Army, and the public at large, at the end of 1941 the party placed one task for all the organizations in republic, to curb the “*kulak-mullah*” elements. They sent hundreds of party members into the *kolkhozes* and villages to shore up the power structure.⁶⁵

The two most infamous of *abreks* at this time who would eventually unite to fight the Red Army, were Khasan Israilov and Mairbek Sheripov. Israilov, a former attorney also known as “Terloev” for his clan, was born in 1910 in the village of Nashkoi, Chechnya. He is regarded as the premier resistance, guerrilla fighter, and *abrek* during the war. In 1929, he finished school in Rostov-on-Don and became a *komsomolets* in the Communist Party. In

1931, he was a journalists for the “Peasant Journal,” getting into trouble for writing about spirituality and how the local Soviet and party dignitaries were robbing the Chechen people. He was then arrested by the Cheka for counterrevolutionary slander and *banditizm*, and sentenced to ten years in prison. In three years, he was released, let back into the party, and attended the Communist University of Toilers of the East in Vostok. However, his anti-bureaucratic writings critiquing party functionaries as “robbers and bribe-taking swine,” once again landed him a five year sentence in a labor camp. In 1938, he was released again for good behavior.⁶⁶

Once out of prison, he drew up a “Temporary Program for the Organization of a Checheno-Ingush Unified Party of Caucasian Brethren,” also known as the OPKB. The goals of the group were large and included ideals such as, coordinated uprisings, organizing desertions from the Red Army, the destruction of *kolkhozes*, the organization of terrorist acts in the region, arming bandit insurgents with modern weapons, supporting the German advance by communicating with the High Command, and organizing daily engagements with the NKVD. Before long, he had forty-one illegal organizations set up in villages where anti-Soviet sentiment was high, and five-thousand people joined the group establishing communication with like-minded bands throughout the North Caucasus. By 1942, he had claimed to have brought almost 25,000 people under his leadership in Grozny, Gudermes, and Malgobek.⁶⁷

It was no surprise that Israilov was being monitored by the party, and the NKVD. However, both organizations had been hindered considerably earlier by Stalin’s Terror, and he was able to slip back into the mountains of Southeast Chechnya. It was there in January 1940 that he wrote:

“For twenty years Soviet power brought war on people, *kulaks*, and called our *mullahs* bandits, and bourgeoisie nationalists. Now I am convinced that war is coming henceforth for the destruction of my people. Therefore I have decided to be the head of a movement for my people. I quickly understood that not just the Chechen and Ingush, but all the Caucasus will have difficulty freeing themselves from the heavy yoke of Red imperialism, but fanatical belief in justice and laws and the hope of independence of the people of the Caucasus and all the world have inspired me.”⁶⁸

Israilov was successful from the start. By February of that year, he and his band of armed *abreks* and deserters captured the villages of Galanchozhem, Sayasanom, Chaberloem, and pieces of the Shatovski *raion*. By midsummer of 1941, his small army consisted of five-

thousand armed guerrillas, and at least twenty-five thousand sympathizers were aided everywhere they went as the NKVD estimated that in virtually all villages there were seven to fifteen small bands of *abreks* and anti-Soviet elements. The simple strategy of the heavily armed units was to go out and take shots at the nearest Red Army establishment. In 1942, Israilov was such a threat, that the Red Army began attacking his supposed hideouts by the air, with little effect. However, a big blow came in June of that year as two of his key leaders, M Basaev and G. Dzhangireev were informed on and caught by the NKVD after a shootout that left at least four dead and six wounded. This forced Israilov to create a more rigid, clandestine group of *banditz* who had typically resisted military discipline before. In accordance, new objectives were to, “brutally avenge the enemies for the blood of our native brothers, the best sons of the Caucasus. To mercilessly annihilate *seksoty* (collaborators) agents and other informants for the NKVD. And to categorically forbid guerrillas to spend the night in homes or villages without the security of reliable guards.”⁶⁹

A few years earlier in 1938, Chechen Mairbek Sheripov was arrested for nationalist activity, and released one year later for lack of evidence. Much like Israilov, he had joined the party at a young age. Upon his release he formed the Chechen Mountain Nationalist Socialist Underground Organization using his family and personal contacts. Its main goal was to organize an armed uprising to be activated as the German Wehrmacht approached the Chechen-Ingush ASSR. The NKVD took this group seriously as the head in the region, S. Albogachiev, stated that, “the band now has a committee and has begun to prepare an uprising in the mountainous regions of the republic, with the aim of overthrowing Soviet power.” The NKVD Anti-Banditry Department also viewed Sheripov and his roving gangs as a serious threat. So much so, they sent the head of the entire department, Rudenko, to the republic on a mission to find out why the republic was a hotbed of crime. He noted, “There are on record 33 bandit groups with a total of 175 members and 18 bandits with no affiliation. There are also an additional 10 groups with 104 members. During my visit, 11 bandit groups and 80 members were uncovered. Thus, as of August 1943 there were 359 bandits in 54 groups in the republic.”⁷⁰

The Soviets began to deal with many people they arrested, but later released. Sheripov was one of those, “remnants of the socially hostile element, which had been shattered, but not completely destroyed.” Many of the released inmates were drawn into

armed groups, and in early 1940 Sheripov and his band begin invading Red Army lines. By 1941, his organization of *abreks*, deserters, and escaped criminals, moved throughout the southern parts of the Republic, including Shatoi, Cheberloi, and the Itum-Kale District. He also established links with different clans, religious leaders, and Israilov's band. In August 1942, after building up his forces near the village of Dzumskoi, Sheripov's band took the village, and the local people looted and pillaged Soviet property. He went on to take the village of Himoy, but had to leave as the Red Army was preparing reinforcements. He knew of the Red Army's coming because of information given to him by Idris Aliyev, the Chief of the GUBB. The gang of an estimated 150 bandits left Himoy with the intention of meeting near fifteen-hundred rebels in the Itum-Kale district to take the whole region of southern Chechnya. The eventual attack on the district town was repulsed by a small garrison, and the rebels began to flee. They then tried to reunite with Israilov's band to the east of them, but state security agents caught up with them. In the Shatoevskogo district, a special operation was conducted, and on 7 November NKVD agents surrounded and killed Sheripov.⁷¹

Although Sheripov's death was a blow to the movement, not only was Israilov still alive, but other *abreks* and small bands of guerrillas remained in the fight. One such man was the *abrek* Khasukha Magomadov, a devout Muslim who studied the Koran and spoke Arabic. He was born in 1905 in the mountain village of Gatin-Kali in the Shatoi region. In the summer of 1939, he had accidentally killed a man, and was not only declared innocent by *sharia* law, but he was also forgiven by the man's family. The NKVD however, which had been searching for the man for a couple years, captured and imprisoned him. Like any good *abrek*, he escaped and went on a personal vendetta to hunt down the secret police agents who arrested him. He joined Israilov and Sheripov in the mountains, and became a seasoned fighter. He was the head of a mission that laid a trap for a column of GUBB agents, killing twenty and wounding numerous others in fighting. He also witnessed the deportation and exile of his people that will soon be discussed. It is said that after the deportations, he walked through his deserted village in 1944 and saw the stable where the NKVD had locked in seven-hundred inhabitants, and set fire to it. He then found and killed the Communist district chairman of the area, and then snuck up on and stabbed to death the NKVD Lieutenant-Colonel who was charged with finding him. He then spent the next thirty-two years running from the NKVD/KGB. On 28 March 1971, the seventy-one year old Khasukha was finally

caught by police as a militia man emptied his machine gun into him. The rumor was that his reputation was so fierce that no one dared approach the body until the evening of the next day.⁷²

Economic problems may also help to explain to a degree the rise of *banditizm* in the republic. I. Serov, the deputy people's commissar of internal affairs made a visit to the republic in the fall of 1942 acknowledging that the area lacked the basic necessities and food delivered from other parts of the union, commenting:

“For quite some time the local authorities have not been delivering consumer goods (kerosene, matches, soap, salt, etc.) to the mountainous areas, causing unprecedented price rises for the items, all of which has to some extent set the local people against the authorities...no political education efforts were launched to clarify the situation...Cheka operations conducted in the absence of political education and in a situation where the mountain people's needs for consumer goods remain unmet will be ineffective, and we will not succeed in driving a wedge between the bandit rank-and-file and their ringleaders.”⁷³

The examples of *banditizm* doing serious damage behind NKVD and GUBB lines were many. In July 1941, Baisagurov Mekmurza and his brother Tuta killed an employee of the NKVD Cheberloi field office named Munaev. Two months later a gang destroyed the Dai Village Soviet and Cooperative Society. In December of that year, the Baisagurov brothers killed the deputy director of the NKVD's Anti-Banditry Department in the ASSR. A year later bandits twice attacked *kolkhozes* in the Cheberloi Raion. In one of the attacks the guards were disarmed and one who tried to resist was shot to death. In May 1943, the Sadykov brothers, Khamid and Khalid, and Amchi Baisagurov Badaev, were killed execution style by unknown persons for working with NKVD agencies against bandits. Overall, from the years 1941-1943, records indicated that fifty-one Red Army soldiers and officers and NKVD operatives were murdered in the ASSR.⁷⁴

At the end of November 1943, a band of thirty-four outlaws attacked the “Red Livestock Breeder” section of a *kolkhoz*. Fighting went on for two hours and several people were killed. Twenty-three of the *kolkhozniki* who took part were awarded certificates of honor by the Supreme Soviet. Henceforward, more decisive measures were taken against the bands of deserters and “their counter-revolutionary actions.”⁷⁵ For the Soviet machine however, by this time the movement against *abreks*, mullahs, and common criminals was showing dividends. According to GUBB, from July 1941 into 1944, in the Chechen-Ingush

ASSR alone security organs destroyed 197 gangs. The total casualties to bandits were 657 killed, 2,764 captured, and 1,113 others who confessed to crimes and gave information on others.⁷⁶

At the same time, over forty-thousand Chechens and Ingush fought for the Red Army with fifty of them earning the military's highest recognition of Hero of the Soviet Union. In late 1941, the Germans entered the Yaroslav *oblast*, and the brothers Zyadin and Zakoy Akhmatov immediately volunteered to go to the front. Together with Russians, led by Commander B.L. Sokolov, the group moved over eight thousand kilometers to Smolensk to get to the rear of the German advances. In Smolensk, then Leningrad, Pskovsky, and Byelorussia the partisans fought to gain back land lost at the hands of the Wehrmacht. In Pirogova, a south Kiev village, the group crushed a convoy of forty tanks with arms and ammunition, exploded key bridges, and blew up trains with logistical support headed towards Stalingrad. They even moved into the Slovakian town of Dubovica to destroy a key Wehrmacht intelligence training center, and Zyadin showed the Russians how cool Chechens were during battle. Commander Sokolov would later write, "Akhmatov was one of the first volunteers into our group. In spite of heavy wintry conditions at our base in spring, which the Germans and their police were combing, the partisans held out energetically never their spirits declining. This was due to Akhmatov. He was dancing, joking, and singing during times of war."⁷⁷

Another Chechen, M. Federov, used his skills as a railroad manager to head an underground reconnoiter group in the mountains behind the Wehrmacht's lines. He then established a link with Commander D.N. Medvedev, and the renowned intelligence agent Nikolai Kyznetsov. From 1942 to the end of 1943, the partisan group of volunteers supplied reliable intelligence on all things the Wehrmacht were doing to the Red Army. That October they were caught, and Federov and almost four hundred of his group were interrogated and shot by the Germans. Later in Byelorussia, partisan volunteer detachments took up ranks with different motor-infantry brigades. In June 1944, two Grozny *komsomolets*, B. Galyshkin and F. Ozmitel and their unit were surrounded by German forces. A shock group was created, headed by the two Chechens, to dig through the encirclement and get supplies and information out to other small partisan groups. They were successful, but on 14 June they were both killed in the fighting. The Byelorussians erected a monument to them near Lake

Polika where the fighting took place. For heroism and courage Galyshkin earned two Orders of the Red Banner, and later that November he posthumously received the Order of Hero of the Soviet Union.⁷⁸

Despite this, Beria and Stalin soon used the ideas of desertion, fighting for the Fascists, *banditizm*, and anti-Soviet activities as an excuse to forcibly remove and relocate over four-hundred thousand Chechens and Ingush, among many other ethnicities. On 20 February 1944 Lavrenti Beria arrived in Grozny, and *Operatsiia Chechevitsa* (Operation Lentils) was underway. He brought with him 19,000 NKVD, NKGB, and SMERSH (counter intelligence) agents, with assistance from 100,000 NKVD regular troops. Although Beria tried to keep it as secret as possible, earlier the Balkars and Karachais had been deported, and the Chechen populace was aware that their fate may be intertwined with other North Caucasian ethnicities. One security service agent overheard a conversation between two Chechen men before the deportation had started: “We will not be forgiven by the Soviet power. We did not serve in the army, in the *kolkhozes* we did not work, we were absent on the front, we do not pay taxes, and there is *banditizm* everywhere. The Karachais were evicted, and now it is our turn.”⁷⁹

Three days before Beria had reached Grozny he sent a matter of fact note to Stalin outlining how the eviction was going to work:

“Preparation for the operation to evict the Chechen and Ingush are over. After clarification there are to be resettled 459,486 people. Including those living in areas of Dagestan bordering Chechnya-Ingushetia, and in the mountains, and Vladikavkaz. Given the scale of the operations and features of the mountains, it was decided to carry out the eviction over 8 days, within which the first 3 days of operation will be completed throughout the lowland and foothill areas, and partly on some mountain settlements, covering more than 300 thousand people. The remaining 4 days will be held to evict the mountain areas, covering the remaining 150 thousand people... Given the seriousness of the operation, please allow me to remain in place until the operation is complete...”⁸⁰

Much like the Nazis allowed foreigners to work for them at the concentration camps and to fight for the Wehrmacht, Soviet security services also had many volunteers of Dagestanis, Ossetians, and Georgians who had ridden with gangs of *abreks* during the war. Trying to stay alive, and perhaps due to bitterness over Chechen raids, could have been the reasoning behind the idea of volunteering to work with the NKVD. The overall plan was to start on the morning of 23 February by inviting all people in the lowlands into cordoned off

areas in the towns. The reasons for this was to collect their belongings, disarm the population, and then begin putting them in airless trains to Central Asia. The night before the start of the eviction Beria telegraphed to Stalin, "I consider that the operation to expel the Chechens and Ingush will be successful."⁸¹

At five a.m. the operation commenced, and it was efficient. Six hours in, Beria reported that there had only been six attempts at resistance, and those were put down quickly by the NKVD. By that time they had already put 94,741 people in boxcars heading towards Central Asia, or almost twenty percent of the population. He figured that a good estimate was that if the authorities could put twenty-three people in each car they would need a total of twenty thousand cars to get the job done.⁸² By the evening of 25 February it was almost over. As Beria put it, "The operation to evict the Chechens and Ingush runs fine. By the evening we have shipped in railway cars 342,647 people with an additional 86 trains sent to the next area of settlement."⁸³ The first of March was one of Beria's last communiques as the genocide had been completed. The totals were 478,479 people loaded onto 180 trains of which 91,250 were Ingush, the rest Chechens. One of the last trains held former senior officials and religious leaders. There were some hiccups throughout the republic though. The security services had to arrest over two thousand anti-Soviet elements, as well as seize 20,072 items that included 4,868 rifles, and 479 machine guns and automatic rifles. But in the end, most resistance was futile, as "the operation was organized and there were no serious cases of resistance of other incidents."⁸⁴

Throughout the week of deportations Beria reveals nothing on the human suffering that occurred. It was just something that needed to be done, and he did it with a cool competence. As his biographer, Amy Knight, wrote, "The deportations were a routine, successful NKVD operation, for which he might receive an additional portion of approval from his leader." He also saw that the men who helped in the evictions would receive glory. In December 1944, he wrote to Stalin asking that the NKVD-NKGB officers who had distinguished themselves with good work be honored. Stalin complied, and 413 NKVD members received awards.⁸⁵ It was not just the actual deportation that was grotesque, but the economy and culture of the republic suffered enormous losses. Unique historical and religious monuments were demolished in a week. In the mountains, thousands of ancient and medieval monuments and burial sites were blown up and burned. Archives were destroyed,

and priceless Arabic manuscripts and community chronicles (*teptary*) were seized and fed to the flames. Encrusted silver and wooden tableware, goblets, vases, trays, ornaments, swords, sabers, daggers, carpets, and much else was also pillaged.⁸⁶

Years later, an old Vyacheslav Molotov, the Soviet Union's Foreign Minister during the deportations, was confronted about his shared responsibilities for the horrible actions.

Molotov not only defended himself, but Stalin as well:

“Oh, so we have become wise after the event, have we? Now we know everything, we anachronistically mix up events, squeeze time into a single point. Everything has its history. The fact is that during the war we received reports about mass treason. Battalions of Caucasians opposed us at the fronts and attacked us from the rear. It was a matter of life and death; there was no time to investigate the details. Of course innocents suffered. But I hold that given the circumstances, we acted correctly.”⁸⁷

As historian and professor Steven Merritt Miner argues, it was Molotov who anachronistically mixed up the events, “Moscow did not order the deportations as a defensive measure while the alleged treason was occurring, but rather toward the end of the war, as vengeance.”⁸⁸ This will be important because the Chechens never forgot this, and whether they were resettled in the Central Asian wastelands or imprisoned, they earned respect for being a tough, close-knit people who banded together to do what needed to be done.

Official and Parallel Islam, the Brotherhoods Go Underground Again

During the war, the Communist Party continued its attack on religion. Islam was particularly targeted because Lenin had perceived it as exceptionally backwards and reactionary. Using the Terror as a backdrop, and continuing through The Great War, mosques, *madrassahs*, shrines, and holy tombs were shut down. A decade earlier, the public arena in the Soviet Union became completely secular, but even Stalin could not eradicate Islam and the people continued to secretly and illegally perform rituals such as prayers, funerals, marriages, and schooling. By the 1940's, in an effort to get a handle on the still lively religion the Party created what was termed “official Islam” or state-run Islam. The idea was that it would be impossible to completely absolve the religion as it was much less dependent on services and the clergy than Christianity, and therefore could be practiced easily and in secret. The Union was cut into four regions, and each region was headed by a Soviet representative called a *mufti*. There was a *mufti* in Ufa for Europe and Siberia; one in

Tashkent for Central Asia; one in Baku, Azerbaijan for the Southern Caucasus; and the fourth was stationed in Makhachkala, Dagestan for the North Caucasus. But as will be seen, the *muftis* were of a ceremonial and political nature, and were in no position to defend the religious interest of Muslims.⁸⁹

Prior to the war's end, in May 1944, the government created the Council for Affairs of Religious Cults. Throughout the entire USSR they shut down mosques and made *madrassahs* illegal. By 1945, the government had successfully brought the total mosques down from twenty-thousand to less than forty, and Islam had been reduced to the legal status of a cult. This is when the clandestine "unofficial" or "parallel" Islam began to flourish. Mosques and *madrassahs* began to go underground, and if the authorities found one another would open once that was closed. The Party organs and the organs of national security tried to gain political and ideological control of the people in the Chechen-Ingush republic by pursuing active members of the Naqshbandi and Qadiriya brotherhoods, forcing public denials of the Muslim faith, and uncompromisingly throwing them in prison as criminals if they did not. At times they shut down tombs, and demolished ancient monuments erecting new Communist buildings in the exact places where people's ancestors had died. By the war's end, the relationship between the brotherhoods and the Communist regime was based on nothing more than latent hostility.⁹⁰

In Exile

In *Gulag Archipelago*, the Russian nationalist and former inmate Alexander Solzhenitsyn witnessed the Chechen people's hatred for the Soviet government while in exile in Central Asia. They were "rough" and "arrogant" and could not conceal their contempt for Russians even if they had tried, but they were also freedom-loving people and gracious hosts. In Part V of the book, he described a 1949 escape by two Slav prisoners from a labor camp in Kazakhstan. Desperately in need of food and clothing they stole a cow from a Chechen farmer and were quickly caught. Most wanted the two men shot for theft, but a Soviet investigator arrived to tell the villagers that they did a good job catching the two criminals because in reality they were not thieves, but rather dangerous political criminals. Appreciation for a job well done by the Soviet authorities changed the attitudes of the villagers towards the thieves, and the owner of the cow then brought the prisoners bread,

mutton, and even some money collected by the Chechens. Showing how much he disdained the authorities, the farmer then tells the prisoners, “What a pity! You should have come and told me who you were and I’d have given you everything you wanted.”⁹¹

Only a couple of weeks after deportation, the Chechen-Ingush ASSR was dismantled and gave way to the Grozny district in the Stavropol region. A secret report from Foreign Minister Molotov discussed the details of the name change and subsequent moves by the Soviet authorities. The Grozny region would not only contain the capital city, but all the important cities and villages surrounding it, including, Gudermes, Shali, Shatoy, Kizliyar, and Urus-Martan. Quickly and efficiently, the identity of the Chechens and Ingush to their homeland was being erased. In April 1944, the Soviets created eight-hundred *kolkhozes* in the former ASSR, and the land was then turned over to ethnic Russians, Cossacks, and other ethnicities that had been moved in.⁹²

Meanwhile, the main mass of settlers were dispatched to the Kazakh SSR, but even Beria realized that the conditions were inadequate for over four-hundred thousand people to start life over. The Kazakh Communist Party did not have the means necessary to employ all the people in a socially useful way, or to economically help those who could not work for the betterment of society. Rebellions occurred almost immediately, and the brilliant but violent Deputy People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs Sergei Kruglov, was dispatched to “restore” order. By July, well over two thousand deportees had been arrested for various crimes, and the NKVD had created 429 special settlements to monitor criminals against the regime to help against the struggle against escapees.⁹³

Despite the major NKVD presence in the region, criminal activity, especially “unauthorized exits” from the compulsory settlements were widespread. In order to “strengthen the regime” and stem the thousands of Chechens, Ingush, Tartars, and Ukrainians that were illegally trying to make their way back to their homelands the authorities increased the criminal liability of the crime. The punishment for trying to leave and being captured was twenty years in a gulag, with the consideration of shooting of said runaways if the internal security service deemed it necessary. The punishment for harboring or contributing to a runaway would get a mandatory five years in a gulag. Likewise, if a deportee was not deemed to be sufficiently providing “socially useful work or leading a parasitic life in the places of settlement,” they were liable for eight years in prison.⁹⁴

The regime was strict. Not only was being sent to a gulag a near-death sentence, but oftentimes the punishment did not fit the crime. If a deportee wanted to move outside of their *spetsposalentsa* (special deportee area) they needed a permit from their *spetskommendaturoi* MGB (Ministry of State Security) or NKVD superiors. Many time the settlers were not completely aware of the borders, as their territory was sometimes limited to a couple streets in a larger city, or the outskirts of a village, and no further. Some just needed to go to the next *raion* to get supplies and did not want to wait for the bureaucratic red tape. No matter the reason, if caught these movements were considered an attempt at escape, and punishment would be meted out.⁹⁵

The Chechens, however, tried to escape by the thousands, were caught, and soon populated many of the work camps throughout Kazakhstan, Siberia, and other remote places of the Soviet east. Much of this had to do not only with the absolute disdain for ethnic Russians and their security services, but also the adamant desire to return home. By the late 1940's, in the prison camps groups such as Chechens, Lithuanians, and Ukrainians took over the criminals' role as policemen, and fought each other for control. Power meant who controlled the dining hall because the cook would not only make what the group wanted, but would give more food to the group with the most power. Muscling in and taking over camps was something the Chechens excelled at the moment they arrived. Inmate Marlen Korralov witnessed their ferocity firsthand when a group arrived in his *lagpunkt* (prison center), immediately went to the barracks, and "threw all of the belongings on the lower bunks onto the floor, and moved in their own possessions." This was important because the lower bunks were seen as the "aristocratic" bunks in the camps.⁹⁶

Another prisoner who saw the fierceness of the Chechens was Leonard Sitko. He had been a Red Army soldier in a Nazi POW camp only to be arrested on his return to Russia. While in camp he witnessed a fierce battle for control of the prison between the Chechens, Ukrainians, and Russians. The argument started between "brigade leaders" of the ethnic groups, but soon "it became war, all-out war." The Chechens attacked the Russian barracks, and many were wounded. Eventually the prison guards put the rebellion down, the ringleaders were all caught, and put into punishment cells. Sitko could see that although the fight was over who ran the camp it also had a deeper origin in the idea of hatred between the peoples of different ethnicities. He expounded that the minority ethnicities viewed the

“Soviets and Russians to be one and the same thing. Although there were plenty of Russians in the camp, that didn’t stop them from thinking of Russians as occupiers and thieves.”⁹⁷

One of the largest prison rebellions in the Soviet Union was in 1954 at the Kengir gulag in Kazakhstan. The uprising lasted a little longer than a month in between May and June of that year, and escalated when an MVD guard was surrounded by inmates and killed with his weapon. The gulag boss quickly wired Moscow to send a commission for help.⁹⁸ The next night, four hundred male prisoners broke into one of the armories, took weapons, and tried to get into the women’s barracks. A firefight ensued that killed thirteen, severely wounded thirty two prisoners, and another twenty seven were lightly wounded. The MVD flew an operations group there the next day.⁹⁹ For the next two weeks things calmed down as the prisoners took control of the third camp under the direction of former Red Army Lieutenant Colonel and German POW Kapiton Kusnetsov. The list of demands was long, but some included, reducing of sentences, allowing the men and women to mingle freely, limiting the punishment for solitary confinement, and so on.¹⁰⁰

Of the roughly twenty-thousand prisoners in the gulag, 124 were Chechens, and another 56 were Ingush. The majority, almost fifty percent, were Ukrainian, and another ten percent were ethnic Russians and Lithuanians. In camp three, where the rebellion took place, there were just under six thousand total prisoners. Most of whom were in the camp for treason, and charged with being Trotskyite agents, former foreign agents, religious leaders, or collaborators with the fascist occupiers.¹⁰¹ Although the Chechens were small in number as compared to other ethnicities they still helped with the rebellion. Trapped inside, the prisoners had begun to publicize their rebellion by rigging hot air balloons with slogans written on them hoping they would make it to the nearby village. The authorities began shooting them down, and the Chechens began making kites at which they turned out to be quite apt. The kites were successful in a favorable wind, and did drop leaflets in the village, but in an almost Mary Poppins-like scenario the authorities began fashioning their own kites to fly up and entangle the prisoners?¹⁰²

On 21 June, The Center warned the MVD and gulag authorities to put down the rebellion or they would send in tanks. The prison authorities were incapable of this, and five days later after a radio warning appealing to the prisoners to put down their weapons, five Soviet T-34 tanks entered the prison camp, along with dogs and almost two thousand troops.

Chaos ensued as the prisoners used homemade grenades, guns, lances, and iron rods to defend themselves. The authorities claimed the tanks fired blank ammunition, but the Red Army and MVD troops were most certainly shooting live rounds. After ninety minutes of fighting, the rebellion was put down, and according to the Soviets thirty-five prisoners were killed, and almost forty soldiers were wounded.¹⁰³ However, prisoner accounts leave the total number of casualties nearer to five hundred, as they claimed that the tanks were running over live prisoners with impunity, and shots were fired into crowds. Lyubov Bershadskaya, a prisoner who helped the camp doctor, talked of the tanks running right through a crowd of women prisoners crushing living people. She would later watch the doctor, Julian Fuster, stay on his feet for thirteen hours helping the wounded and dying as best he could until he fainted.¹⁰⁴

About forty-eight hours after the fighting ceased, Kusnetsov wrote a long confession spelling out why there was a rebellion, how the camp functioned, and who was involved. Chechen prisoners were mentioned twice. The first instance detailed how some of them agreed to go back to work in mines during the rebellion. At first, it appears they were being good workers, but Kusnetsov admits it was so they could get in contact with the gold and ore mine workers who were not prisoners to get the word out to about the prisoner's "struggle with the Soviet system and its punitive policies." The second time they are mentioned, and he cannot remember any of their names, was much later in the long confession. It dealt with how a group of Chechens worked with a Lithuanian by the name of Iozac Kondratas to discredit the negotiators that the party kept sending in to talk about demands that would end the standoff. On this particular occasion, the head of the Karaganda *oblast* committee visited Camp Three to see the situation of the prisoners, and to listen to requests. The Chechens, with Kondratas, quickly seized on the opportunity arguing that a mere crony from the Karaganda district had no authority, and that they would not negotiate with anyone unless they were a member of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Party. The plan worked, and much to Kusnetsov's dismay (or confessed dismay after the fact), the Chechens and Kondratas had "belittled the dignity and authority of the committee members and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and...extended the existing situation in the camp."¹⁰⁵

The "forty day" uprising in Kengir was important for two reasons. Firstly, it was a year after Stalin had passed away, and accelerated the de-Stalinization process that would soon lead to the Chechen and Ingush being able to return to their homeland. Secondly, it

cemented the ideals of Chechens as a tough, anti-Russian people with a penchant for crime. Even Solzhenitsyn, who witnessed the whole uprising had to begrudgingly admit that the Chechens surpassed all others in rebelliousness and criminal tendencies:

"There was one nation which would not give in, would not acquire the mental habits of submission--and not just individual rebels among them, but the whole nation to a man. These were the Chechens....They had been treacherously snatched from their home, and from that day they believed in nothing....The years went by--and they owned just as little as they had to begin with. The Chechens never sought to please, to ingratiate themselves with the bosses; their attitude was always haughty and indeed openly hostile. They treated the laws on universal education and the state curriculum with contempt, and to save them from corruption would not send their little girls to school, nor indeed all of their boys....They were capable of rustling cattle, robbing a house, or sometimes simply taking what they wanted by force. As far as they were concerned, the local inhabitants, and those exiles who submitted so readily, belonged more or less to the same breed as the bosses. They respected only rebels...and as soon as the people of Kengir showed independence and courage they were immediately at their disposal. If we feel that we have not earned the respect of others we should ask ourselves if we live like them."¹⁰⁶

It should be realized that all the deportees were treated with contempt, as nothing more than cheap labor. In the beginning years, those who survived living in Central Asia lived hard and cold in makeshift houses and communities. Children ran wild looking for scraps, and tens of thousands died of starvation and cold in the first couple years. This is why the classification of being a hardened, independent, nation of outlaws was something that the Chechens took pride in. They were not Russian, they were the opposite of the Soviets, and therefore committing crimes evolved out of rebellion. One old exile, Suleiman Usmanov recalled laughing years later, "In 1953 when they announced Stalin had died there was mourning, the Russians were crying, but we Chechens, we secretly danced for joy."¹⁰⁷

Chapter 5: The Return Home and the Fight for Authority

After Stalin's death in 1953, much pressure on the Soviet Party came from the deported peoples living in the restrictive "special settlements." Straight away, undeterred by the real threat of arrest and punishment, an increasing number of Chechens and Ingush began to make their way home. More than six-thousand made the illegal trek back to their homeland in 1954 and 1955 only to see their homes lived in, land taken away from them, and the republic renamed. In many cases, they forcibly took their homes back from the new inhabitants, and harassed other non-Chechen ethnicities. Their return caused grief not only to the Communist Party, but to the people who now inhabited the former regions where the Chechens and Ingush lived. The *oblast* committees of Grozny, Dagestan, and North Ossetia reported that the return of the Chechens could only be viewed as a negative thing. Not only were there no economic opportunities that would allow them to be employed and resettled, but the Party and Soviet workers expressed their disdain of the Chechens as they had been, "proven wrong in the past and are being proven wrong now." The translation: they were criminals then, and nothing had changed.¹

By the end of 1956 this had become a problem that cried for a remedy. At the 20th Congress of the CPSU, the Party allowed that the majority of the population that was deported was not because of collaboration with Fascists, but rather because they shunned the Leninist-Marxist Cult of Personality that Stalin had created for himself. With that in mind, the Party began the full task of rehabilitating the people of unfounded evictions restoring them to their earlier places of residence. Much of this had to do with the pressure that was coming from the exiled communities, and the fact that that many were going back illegally as it was. The Congress declared that the Chechen-Ingush ASSR would be restored within the Russian Federation of the Soviet Union. This gave them supposed national autonomy while the Party would help the community to rebuild its social-political life, the economy, and its cultural centers. However, the Party believed that in order to do this the Chechens and Ingush would need to be relocated in the middle of the worker's population so that they would become good workers, and a national cadre of worker's would be created through the consolidation of local organizations.²

By January 1957, the presidium of the Supreme Soviet had begun meetings to plan the complete restoration of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR),

and the office of the Grozny *oblast*. They also discussed transforming the Grozny *obkom* (Province Party) of the KPSS (Communist Party) to the Chechen-Ingush *obkom*. This move was to help introduce the new government to the incoming Chechen and Ingush returning from exile, and to recruit them into the party. In the same vein, the protocols from the meetings explicitly announced that the people would have a direct choice into who was in the government, and how it was run.³

In the spring of 1957, 140,000 Chechens and Ingush were returned to their republic, the Chechen-Ingush Republic was officially brought back into existence, and one year later all people were allowed to move back to their homeland.⁴ The 17,000 families that were legally allowed back into the republic in 1957 coincided with mounting reports in the region of fighting and armed clashes between the returning deportees and those who had moved into their houses and villages. Even more were illegally buying tickets at train stations connecting Kazakhstan to Moscow, then boarding trains headed to Grozny, Rostov, Vladikavkaz, or other destinations. When they arrived, many refused “categorically” to go where the authorities told them to, and this was truly what instigated the Soviets to once again create the Chechen-Ingush Republic. However, the problems were far from over as the MVD reported that from 1958 to 1972 nearly one out of six Chechen and Ingush adults, some 115,455 people, were brought before the authorities on some charge of criminal behavior. Mainly, they argued, because of the “clan system and Islamic loyalties of the natives.”⁵

Much of the reason for allowing the Chechens and Ingush back into cities like Vladikavkaz and Grozny was an attempt by the Soviets to stop ever-growing rumors that Chechens were kicking Russians out. But the truth was that over 36,000 members of the Russian population left immediately when the Chechen-Ingush came back, and that was detrimental as many were involved in the oil business surrounding Grozny. Throughout 1958 tensions in the oil city were growing and on 24 August they boiled over. On that day, a Russian sailor on leave asked a young Ingush woman to dance not knowing that an Ingush young man had designs on her. A fight broke out and the sailor was killed. The next day at the funeral, a mob made up of Russians followed the coffin up to the local Party leadership demanding he hold a memorial meeting. The man refused, and the police showed up refraining the Russians from entering the building as a crowd of almost 10,000 gathered in Lenin’s square where the party office was located. After a couple of hours, an unknown

woman stepped onto a truck and demanded three things: Firstly, that all Chechen and Ingush be expelled from the city, and the Republic; secondly, that a massive search of all North Caucasians be done, and anyone who held illegal weapons should be killed on the spot (as the Chechens were known for having weapons, she was obviously sure that most would be found with some type of firearm); and lastly, that the reestablishment of Russian control of the Republic begin immediately. Leaflets were distributed throughout the Chechen city once again asking for the deportation of the original inhabitants. Later that day in the square, an empty bus drove by and the driver got out and yelled, “The Chechens fired on my bus. They killed a man and a woman, a young woman. They cut off her hand.” An elderly man who was plainly Caucasian was set upon and beat to death right in front of the military guards who did nothing even though they had been ordered to make sure violence was kept to a minimum. After four days, eventual order was restored, but smaller clashes ensued throughout the area, and the Grozny Riots became one of the worst ethnic clashes in the history of the Soviet Union.⁶

The “Sufi Banditz”

Due to mistrust, to resist the authorities, and maintain their way of life, Chechens began to celebrate their “illegal, Islamic” way of life while masking it in official channels. For instance, they began going to holy shrines on Soviet holidays to disguise what they were doing. Births, weddings, and funerals were held in an official capacity, but then the real occasion would be illegally consecrated in secret afterwards. For instance, a marriage would be registered at the local party office, as law demanded, and the bride would dress in white. After the legal, official ceremony the couple would go home, change into customary costume, and an unregistered *mullah* would solemnize the wedding according to Muslim law. That night there would be a slaughtering of animals, cooking, dancing, and singing. The feast would not come until the early morning to avoid the secret police. Likewise, women would illegally clean and maintain secret holy shrines so as not to bring the wrath from the NKVD. These small, everyday infractions against the state played a key role in sustaining clan, regional, and ethnic solidarity.⁷

The Naqshbandi and Qadiriya brotherhoods excelled at keeping Islam alive through their semi-secret, parallel societies. Immediately they were more powerful than the official

religion, and much like initiation rites into an organized crime syndicate, the *murid* (adept) were accepted into the brotherhood after many rituals, where he would remain under the control of a *murshid*. It was a compulsory and complicated ritual consisting of permanent prayers, invocations, and a litany of either loud or silent *zikr*, which was illegal by that time. In the beginning, recruitment was limited to clans, and this provided them with more secrecy as well as a dynamic and aggressive force. They went beyond the control of official Islam bureaus such as the Muslim Spirit Directorate, and ran their own schools taught in Arabic, created a strong base for anti-Communist propaganda, and ran underground mosques. The overall success of the brotherhoods laid in the fact that they were organized and structured. They usually consisted of thirty to fifty members of which most consisted of extended family. Each group was headed by a sheikh formally recognized as the leader. Not only were they well-organized, clandestine, and underground, but they were also actively militant anti-atheists, or anti-Soviet. Most had their own criminal court and treasury to collect Islamic taxes called *zakat* in their specific region village or region. They imposed heavy fines for breaking Islamic law, the more conservative sects even handing out death penalties for apostasy. As renowned Soviet Muslim scholar Alexandre Bennigsen commented, “The *tariqas* represented perfectly structured hierarchical organizations endowed with an iron discipline stronger than the Communist party.”⁸

The two brotherhoods (*bratva* or *bratsva* in Russian, what the Russian Organized Crime syndicate is called today) were a complete symbiosis of the decentralized Sufi organization, and the clan-like structure of the Chechen and Ingush communities. In conservative cases, such as the Batal-Haji and Vis-Haji *tariqas*, endogamy was practiced, and it was an all-encompassing lifestyle. Women were accepted, and children participated in *zikr* where transistor radios and recorders were used illegally. Many *tariqa* also controlled a great number of clandestine houses of prayer and Koranic schools that were situated in the vicinity of holy places that the Soviets had demolished, quickly becoming a symbol of the fortitude of the Chechen people against foreign intruders.⁹

What the Soviets had not counted on was that the *tariqas* thrived in exile. The Sufi orders became a symbol of national affiliation and a way of demonstrating their protest against the deportations; to safeguard group solidarity; and perhaps most importantly, to ensure group survival. The more “puritan and fanatical” groups such as Batal-Haji forbade

their members to speak Russian, and while in exile in Kazakhstan launched expeditions against the Soviets by purportedly committing crimes against society and the regime for which many of them were charged and sentenced to gulags. Because they took it upon themselves to resolve everyday issues through *adat* and *sharia*, thereby circumventing state laws, in 1960 the sects were charged with illegally “usurping the power of the government.”¹⁰

In addition, the Chechens were considered one of the most religious of peoples in the entire Soviet Union. Closing all the mosques after the deportation only made the brotherhoods more powerful. The closed, well-structured societies with an absolute dedication to religious ideals were the reason why Islam survived the deportations and the subsequent years of persecution. When official Islam was not adequate, which was often, the brotherhoods performed rites, circumcisions, *nikah* (religious marriages), and religious burials. Because the “dangerous, fanatical, anti-Soviet, anti-Socialist, reactionary forces,” could not be contained the Sufi orders were officially outlawed, and therefore began to operate illegally and completely outside the control of the Soviet authorities and the official Islam administration.¹¹

In many cases, the total disregard for Soviet political and social norms and mores was evident. In early 1963, members of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR were discovered to be involved in a religious *magnitizdat*, the recording and transmission of illegal materials on tapes. They were eventually caught and prosecuted, but not before thirty-nine tapes were recorded of at least 500 meters each in length. What was also worrisome to the authorities was the unruliness of the *tariqa* when they conducted their affairs. Many times the debates within the orders became heated, especially when choosing a new leader, and a few ended in massive brawls. But rather than being brought to justice by the Soviets, the perpetrators were almost always tried by *sharia* courts and ended up paying only fines. An example of this was a meeting that took place in 1969 in the Progorodnyi *raion*. Here over 100 people were present, discussing and resolving issues on the basis of *adat* and *sharia* on questions pertaining to blood feuds, burial and betrothal arrangements, divorce and funeral expenses, and adjudicating cases of bridal abduction (*kalym*). It fixed sums to be paid as retribution for murder (5,000 rubles), and *kalym* (1,000 rubles plus a sheep), amongst others. What is profound about the meeting was not only that the authorities had no control over this meeting, but that the resolutions were duplicated and distributed among the population where they were

said to “have acquired the force of law” warning that anyone who violated them would lose the rights of “mutual relations between people according to local custom and law.”¹²

Another way the brotherhoods outmaneuvered the party’s official religion was through the very important Chechen tradition of venerating saints. The “Cult of Saints” as it was called in the area was based on three things that Chechens held dear: pre-Islamic cults, the cults of their clan ancestors, and respect for their Sufi masters. In this way, veneration combined two sets of powerful loyalties: clan solidarity and the prestige enjoyed by the Sufi brotherhoods. Although the Soviets tried to eradicate all the tombs, they missed many, and it is important to note that the guardians of the secret tombs, and other holy places, were handled by the *murids* of the two brotherhoods. In some cases, they even took over the illegal, traditional courts run by *adat* and reversed decisions made by the Communist Party at the local level. The brotherhoods neutralized the authority of the local soviet, and the Soviet court system so much that by the end of the 1950’s Soviet authorities and journalists were talking about the *tariqas* being one of the most “intractable and dangerous adversaries of the regime because they are really the only authentic anti-Soviet mass organization in the USSR.” This did not stop the brotherhoods from growing. By 1970, Sovietologists estimated that over half of the Chechen population, around 220,000 individuals were in one of the illegal brotherhoods. An outstanding number of people in any type of fringe or illegal society.¹³

The brotherhoods excelled at finding places for underground mosques for their adepts and the general public to visit. But they were not just places of worship. They became “havens” for various kinds of unofficial activity like the buying and selling of illegal Korans, privately reproduced religious texts (any illegal reproduced material in the Soviet Union was called *samizdat*), and paraphernalia that was not produced or sanctioned by the Muslim religious boards. These types of rituals and illegal activities were an opportunity for subaltern groups to express resistance, and the Sufis of Chechnya used their moving, underground mosques for the purpose of keeping their religion pure from socialist atheism. Even though the “charlatans, parasites, and crooks” defied the authorities, the brotherhoods had kept Islam pure through extreme persecution, and as Islamic and Soviet historian Mark Saroyan argued, they made sure, “Islam remained as alien a body (to the Soviets) as it did one-hundred years in the past.”¹⁴

Although there were many religions that practiced illegally or under an official capacity in the USSR, Sufism and the *tariqas* became labelled as one of the most fanatical, reactionary, and obnoxious organizations in the country. They were accused of polygamy, the practice of *kalym*, plundering of socialist property, blackmail, physical violence against their adversaries, banditry, manslaughter, murder, and terrorism against native communists. As one Chechen, anti-religious party member M.A. Abdullaev stated, “The fanaticism is dangerous because it may lead to an explosion of religiosity among the masses, and this will give birth to real criminal activity.” This was true in the sense that the *murshids* of the brotherhoods began to be called “bandit-dervishes,” or “Sufi *banditz*” by the Soviet press and scholars.¹⁵

This would not come as a surprise though, as early as the late-1940’s, the more conservative orders were already being tagged as groups comprised of criminals where thieving and breaking the law were daily occurrences. They had become very good at “buying and selling” (*kapitalisticheskii*) and for their illegal enterprises they often swore on the Koran. The Batal-Haji roamed the mountains stealing from *kolkhozes*, terrifying the citizens, and driving off or stealing all-important livestock. For all of this, in 1947, the Sheikh of the *bratva* was captured and sentenced to ten years in a Gulag. His son then took over the group, and upon his return ten years later, the family no longer had to work as they had set up a chain of extortion and protection rackets that the authorities deemed “parasitic,” but could never be proven. In 1960, in the Sredniia Achalukii *okryg*, a Batal-Haji *murid* and son of a *kulak* Hussein Polonkaev, infiltrated the daily lives of the *komsomols* and the Party. Although never convicted, he was accused of some “disgusting things” as he was actively involved in the kidnapping of young girls, and with his “blessing” sold them for brides. At the end of 1963, the head of the Kunta-Haji brotherhood, Nazran Tygan Akhmedov, was convicted and sentenced to one-and-a-half years in a corrective labor camp for unlawfully obtaining pensions (as will be seen, the theft of pensions will be a major problem in post-Soviet Chechnya). In spite of all this, the groups were welcomed by society, and rarely turned in to the authorities. Even though Soviet journalist and scholar Kh. Mamleev repeatedly described the groups as “charlatans and murderers” he was still in awe of the *tariqas* discipline and ability to inculcate themselves into society. When discussing the brotherhoods, he could be talking about any one of a hundred organized crime syndicates, “In them is much team spirit

that thrives on a vicious circle of mutual dependence...They strive (*jihad*) to save their importance and power through criminal and illegal means.”¹⁶

What the Soviets could not understand is why the “slanderous, secret gangs” had such a control over society. They had no doubt the Sufi orders excelled at building illegal spiritual schools that taught from the Koran, that the population still went on pilgrimages, listened to illegal recordings, read *samizdat*, and practiced *zikr*. But they also were adamant about the fact that many of the brotherhoods were nothing more than organized criminals. In 1958, a group of *murids* surfaced traveling through Dagestan and the Chechen-Ingush ASSR calling themselves Amaya. They named themselves after Arsanov Amaya Khidirlesov who was accused of being a *kulak*, *abrek-murid*, and eventually caught in 1938 and killed. Their central location was at Amaya’s grave, which by that time was considered a holy place. From the leadership to the lowest member, the group was made up of accused and sentenced “rakes, swindlers, and pillagers.” They had come up with an extortion plan where every citizen in their area had to pay them one-third of their salary for protection, essentially a *krysha* (roof). The consequences for non-payment ranged from a hefty fine, to theft of property, and in a few rare cases, death. The authorities eventually caught up with the band, and they were convicted of theft of socialist property, *banditizm*, and murder, and sent to gulags throughout the North and East. But not before they had attracted a large number of people outside of their group to do much of their dirty work, and were labeled by the authorities as “shameless profiteers that use religion for criminal activities.”¹⁷

Soviet sources are replete with such adjectives for the two brotherhoods, and there was a serious campaign to end their influence in the region. One thing is for certain, the authorities were flummoxed and worried by the way the *tariqas* influenced daily lives. Not just the men and women who were members of the “illegal gangs of *banditz*,” but the overall respect that the groups had with the people, and the influence they had on the population, especially children. To try to eradicate the “mystical-like animistic, fetishistic, shamanistic, and magical” religion, the Soviet authorities tried to get the women of the population on their side, and to educate the children in government schools. But that did not work as planned. For example, in 1965 in forty *raions* in Dagestan and the Chechen-Ingush ASSR, with over 100,000 people there were only 440 propagandists, and of those only sixteen were women.¹⁸

It was clear that in many areas the Sufi orders had taken over the day-to-day governing of the people, and could survive any attacks made on them by the government. Because they had their own courts of justice, own financial systems based on *zakat*, and their own clandestine schools, the brotherhoods had become more economically and socially viable than many of the *kolkhozes*. They lived completely outside the Soviet legal system, “both in their working activity and in their family sphere.”¹⁹ *Muridism* had trickled down from the oldest to the youngest, and was not only the “arsenal” of anti-Russification, but also a hindrance to the internationalism and atheistic movement that was sought for all the peoples living in the Union.²⁰

Islam pervaded the cultural, political, temperamental, and social aspects of life in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR, thus the authorities tried to stop it from spreading. In 1971, the leaders of the “Society for Culture and Relations of Turks with the North Caucasus” were caught and arrested for disseminating special contraband Korans and religious-nationalist, anti-Soviet propaganda. This did not stop the wave of religiosity though. By 1974, there were over 70,000 sheikhs and *murids* in the region, and almost 800 illegal working mosques. In October of that year, there was a raid on a massive, illegal, anti-Soviet propaganda center in the Gunibsko *raion* where tens of people were arrested for crimes against the state. In December, in the newly made Gergebil *raion*, not only were there mass arrests for propagandizing, but a new appointed sheikh claimed he was the incarnation of the *abrek-murid*, N. Gotzinky, and invoked the name of Shamil for an uprising. It was quickly put down, but the authorities were on guard nonetheless for any more disturbances. Over the next five years, an anti-counterrevolutionary campaign ensued in places like Kizlyar, Krasnodar, and other *raions*, arresting and detaining any members of the “brotherhoods of life” who were enemies of the state, armed traitors, or just plain criminals. The “holy *murids*,” according to the Soviets, were parasites who had lived off the people and their charity, committed serious criminal acts, held secret meetings, banned their members from working in *kolkhozes*, tore their children away from Soviet schools, and hurt the building of a better society by spreading their ideology.²¹

By the 1970’s, the undermining of Soviet power was of the utmost importance to the authorities, and they truly saw the “fanaticism” of Islam as a danger to their whole society. The counter-revolutionary criminals who did things under the flag of Islam were dangerous

not only because they had been involved in real criminal activity, but also because they were leading the charge that was close to erupting into a “religiosity of the masses.”²² They had supported and produced radio stations, gazettes, journals and underground *samizdat* about the “mythical” Russification and ideological imperialism of the Soviet Union. These “anti-Russian, reactionary, forms of bourgeoisie propaganda” were undermining what the Soviets were trying to accomplish by giving the people an anti-Soviet psychology.²³ Through education, marriage, folklore, literature, and other social arenas, the “reactionary, spiritual leaders” had opened up a war against Soviet power by organizing terrorist actions, and committed murder and other crimes against the state. In the eyes of the Soviets, the Sufi orders had brainwashed much of society in following Islamic ethics and “loving their neighbors” only to ensure that the population would protect the archaic groups at all costs.²⁴

Interestingly enough, the authorities took an especial interest in illegal marriages. When comparing the crime to larger, more violent doings, it did not seem that important. But by this time, it became one of the more serious channels in Islam to keep religious consciousness, and although it was a minor crime it was a crime nonetheless. In the Northern Caucasus, the marriages were seen as keeping a purity within their own culture, and in 1979 over ten-percent of Chechen men and women surveyed said they were married exclusively through *sharia* law, and not the state. This would mean that they were officially part of a cult, and married by a “tramp or drifting” *mullah*. Next door in Dagestan, because of illegal marriages, in 1971 fifteen people were convicted of committing anti-social crimes against the state. In 1974 there were eleven arrested, and a year later eight people were convicted. What the illegal marriages did, according to the authorities, was make it so the men could coerce their wives and children into not being good citizens. In 1973-1974, in the Nazranovskon *raion* in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR, ninety-eight children of the Batal-Haji sect did not go to *Komsomolet School*, and another eighty-three went sparingly. Most did not engage with the village soviet in any way, and the authorities claimed the reason for this was that quite often the women and children were threatened with violence or death if they were to study or participate in a Communist atmosphere.²⁵

Along with accusations of ideological sabotage, committed keepers of cults, and other anti-Soviet doings, by the late 1970’s they were also accused of running filial spy rings through the radio station “Freedom.” The Islamic and Turkic “brotherhoods of blood, culture,

language, and religion,” were reactionary, religious men who despite the authorities’ best efforts had permeated the everyday life of society. It was said that the group was also giving messages to the British through the large Chechen diaspora in Turkey. In 1978, four of the sons of the sheikh of the Batal-Haji sect were accused and convicted of murder, stealing from *kolkhozes*, and running cash establishments. The same year, in the Khasavyourt and Gumbetskoi *raions*, the Kunta-Haji brotherhood was accused of assembling centers of counterrevolution in villages, and having communal meetings of criminal activity. The activities were listed as going against atheistic work, openly and publicly practicing *zikr*, using ill-gotten money and valuables for building a following, and running a criminal-religious cult with a systematic illegal propaganda machine. In August 1980, in Akusha near Grozny, a Party session was initiated to examine the criminal doings of the sheikh Abdullah Rabadanov. Fifteen of his young *murids* had committed crimes against the state one was even accused of murdering his father for not wanting him to read the Koran. Later, Rabadanov’s brother Khasukha and another M. Abdysamadov were arrested and tried under Statute 142 of the Communist Party which stated that the organizing of a religious gathering, processions, and other ceremonies of cults taking place inside of homes, out on the streets, or in any public places was strictly illegal.²⁶

In many places, especially the *raions* on the plains that had a large government and deputy presence the atheistic fight against religious ideology and criminality had some victories. One thing the Soviets excelled at was propaganda, and beginning in the late 1960’s lasting into the 1980’s, a campaign commenced that targeted radio stations, televisions, and movie theaters. Shows such as, “Fight the Battle!” “Sweep *adat* (under the rug),” and “Marriage Without *kalym!*” could be heard on radios or seen in theaters. Likewise, *Komsomols* did have an uptick in attendance, and women’s societies were being formed and attended by Islamic women, but even S Ismailov, the Secretary of the Dagestan *Obkom* of the KPCC, confessed that in the mountains and smaller villages the battle was being lost. For example into the 1980’s, in the Leninskovo *raion*, the illegal rituals of *kalym*, *savbol* (monetary presents from guests of a wedding), and *berna* (distribution of gifts to the relatives and other friends of the wife), were still common. It was apparent that the battle for the hearts and minds of society, most importantly the women and children, was being lost. One such outward example of defiance was in June 1978 in the Kalinin *kolkhoz*, as numerous women

were arrested for praying towards Mecca rather than taking the allotted breaks while building a dam.²⁷

It was not just through propaganda and official arrest that the authorities handled the Naqshbandi and Qadiriya *bratvas*. Throughout the Soviet period, the KGB had a hand in finding, arresting, and executing criminals in the North Caucasus. Of the two brotherhoods, the Qadiriya took precedent over the Naqshbandi because they were seen as more radical, aggressive, and clandestine. Former operative Vasili Mitrokhin noted many examples of the KGB's infiltration of the brotherhoods. In 1962, the KGB had "identified" the leader of the Vis-Haji brotherhood as an unofficial *mullah* named Auaev from the Borchasvili clan, a clan that refused to do work expected of them on the *kolkhozes*. The KGB caught him and seven of his associates sentencing them all to five years hard time, which was a relatively easy sentence considering that *banditz* were routinely sentenced to death. The reason for the lax sentence was that Auaev worked for the KGB. Two years later, and after a ten-year manhunt, the authorities had finally caught up and killed one of the leading figures in all of the Qadiriya brotherhood, a Khmad Gaziev. The KGB had first tried to use propaganda to portray him as an armed robber and murderer of Soviet citizens, but this did not get them any closer to the man who had gone underground, presumably being hidden by ordinary citizens. Eventually the KGB Gorsky unit (named after the famous Russian *rezident* who handled US spies such as Algernon Hiss from Washington DC) infiltrated Gaziev's network and found him hiding in a house in the village of Chemulg, Ingushetia. A fire fight ensued, and Gaziev's refusal to be arrested led to his death. After his death, the KGB files described his influence in his community like many *abrek-murids* before him. In the end, they even had to admit that he was a "charismatic leader who inspired fanatical followers with the belief that he possessed supernatural powers."²⁸

Despite the small battles won, the Chechen-Ingush ASSR was near immune to Soviet influence. In 1973, an "atheistic corner" was set up in School Number 2 in the Chechen town of Sernovodsk to teach scientific atheism; days after its completion the school was stripped of all its belongings by the school children who threw most of the materials into the nearby river. That same year, a philosophy lecturer at the Grozny Institute of Higher Education was asked to give a lecture in the city of Nazran attacking religion. He asked some of his local friends for protection against any violence, they replied, "there is no need since no one will attend the

lecture.” In January 1973, there was an uprising in Grozny for a free Ingushetia. After three days some of the mob was dispersed, but over four-hundred remained and were beaten by the authorities and put on buses heading to jail. Instead of stemming the uprising, the next day more broke out in Nazran, Malgobek, and Sunzhensk. Three months later, the head of the KGB and future Party Secretary Yuri Andropov, confessed that the efficiency, secrecy, and discipline that was shown in all of the uprisings made them too hard to suppress. The KGB had stopped trying to control the region as they had done in so many other places in the USSR. The *mullahs* had too much sway, and though they knew that each street, village, town, and city in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR was run by a secret Sufi brotherhood they could not infiltrate near enough of them as Soviet law was ignored. As one Chechen women who was instrumental in the Grozny uprising proclaimed:

“We have no mosques...But this does not stop us praying...We asked Allah to punish those responsible for our misfortunes (presumably the deportations). He heard us. One after another they died or passed from the scene – Stalin, Beria, Malenkov, Molotov, and Khrushchev. Yet we will continue to pray secretly every day.”²⁹

The Naqshbandi and Qadiriya brotherhoods were not only a fixture of everyday life, but they had become a “shadow state” within a state with their secret *sharia* courts, *kalym*, abduction of brides, and other traditional acts that were illegal in the Soviet Union. The *murid* communities played an active role in all daily activities, including pronouncing the morals, customs, domestic and familial relations, marital ties, and education of the youth.³⁰ They had even infiltrated the KGB, not vice-versa, and Moscow was aware of this. Their power had reached the point where religiosity, the building of mosques, and other outward signs of a “parallel” state were too much for the Center to control, and were tolerated in exchange for a modicum of peace. In effect the brotherhoods had become the power behind the façade of the Soviet administration.³¹

Why the Chechen-Ingush ASSR?

Despite Lenin’s optimism, the Soviet Union was far from a crimeless state. It is human nature to try to advance and find comfort, especially in a state of impossible laws. “Speculation” was outlawed, but generally tolerated putting it in the gray area of illegality and legitimacy. When a person could be sent to a gulag for five years for “gleaning” grain from the dispensary, meaning he or she picked up spilled grain off the ground to help feed their

family, then the citizenry was in a constant state of illegality. Not only did this mean they could be arrested at any time, but also that the population lived in a state of moral ambiguity.³² What filled the gap between what the state could provide, and what was needed to survive, was an informal system of *blat*. These were contacts and networks perfected by citizens to obtain scarce goods and services to get around the bureaucratic procedures of the state-controlled economy. The system evolved and became stronger throughout the Soviet period and helps explain much of the present-day practices of organized criminals, their relationships with politicians, and the institutional development of the Russian government. The key to the Soviet's command economy was a monopoly of the allocation of resources, but demand far outpaced the supply, and economic shortages were created. In the vacuum, individuals and groups filled those holes, hence the power of the Naqshbandi and Qadiriya in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR.³³

Although Stalin had punished crime at an unprecedented level with his gulags, by the Brezhnev Era and the softening of criminal laws in 1964, it was a well-established fact that quasi or outright illegal economic activities were a fact of life. Also known as *na levo* ("on the left side), these acts of petty crime were part of the "social contract" of the era to make sure that the citizens could get the goods that the government could not provide. By the end of the Soviet period, fifty-four percent of citizens believed that it was sometimes impossible to solve an important problem without using illegal means, and that it was not a detriment to society to use the means when necessary. While seventy-one percent condemned bribes or "gifts" to officials, which was how many things got done in society, only forty-two percent disagreed with the idea that petty theft of goods, illegal use of state transport, and presents and payments to doctors, nurses and teachers, were a way of getting things accomplished in everyday life.³⁴

What was born out of this atmosphere was *Homo Sovieticus*. With endemic corruption, this new man was not amoral, he simply had two sets of morality. Most in the USSR grew up in conditions where moral compromises were made, and distinctions between right and wrong were not only obscured, but also rationalized. Soviet children grew up steeped in black markets, and "gray areas," that saw their parents bribe officials to get them into school, nurses and doctors for medications, and the basic knowledge that the government could not furnish the goods needed to survive. In a sense, life could not be left to chance or

merit, and a person either manipulated the system or suffered for it. As Russian war hero, dissident, logician, and KGB-collaborator Alexander Zinoviev described, “*Homo Sovieticus* are born, educated and live in such conditions that it is ridiculous to accuse them of immorality or to attribute moral virtues to them...psychologically and intellectually they are plastic, supple, and adaptive.”³⁵

This meant that widespread fraud, or the cheating of the state, was an aspect of Soviet life; it was perpetual and seen at every level. The types of fraud could range from bribery, to lying about hours worked, saying that quotas were met, or selling state goods on the black market for cash. The point was that robbing the state was robbing no one, and sometimes a person was left to their fraudulent ways, sometimes they were imprisoned, and sometimes there was a *tokach*. The *tokach* was the intermediary between factories or *kolkhozes* and the administration charged with obtaining capital goods or spare parts through questionable methods. It was a person who was halfway fraudulent, halfway resourceful acquiring a sort of respectability and status in the population because they were known as someone who could get things done. Every soviet citizen knew the limits of what they could do, and when they needed someone to find something, they could always find someone to supply their demand. Fraud in the USSR also had distinct geographies, and as discussed earlier, certain republics and regions, like that of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR, had a long tradition of questioning the authorities. This is why fraud and the wish to challenge the central authorities in places, “were readily confused, and the repression of fraud was seen as an attack on national rights.”³⁶

Many of the nationality issues Gorbachev ultimately inherited and may have mishandled can also be viewed from the perspective of the Brezhnev era. The contradiction and complexity of the nationality process was one of the main reasons for the emergence of ethnic gangs and the collapse of the Soviet colonial system. Enormous sums of money, unearned and unrelated to any actual transactions, were being pumped from the central treasury into the treasury of republics and ASSR’s. There were not only imaginary crops of Uzbek cotton, unmined minerals in Siberia, and made-up oil production numbers in Grozny, but the practices went as deep as industrial goods to fruits and grains. These money transfers led to the personal wealth of those willing to commit fraud, and were used to shore up personal favors with bribes. The total corruption in the republics became a significant

political fact in creating a strong state of mind of estrangement of the periphery from the center, and with that came rapid and fearsome growth of nationalist feelings. Thus, by the 1980's, a situation unfolded where the minorities were buying from their leaders relative independence and the freedom to get rich for their guarantee of political loyalty. Unfortunately for the center, their political loyalty did not run deep enough.³⁷

It has been shown that one of the main roots of criminal behavior in Chechnya lies with its unwritten laws and customs of *adat* and *sharia*. But this cannot explain everything. In many ways, the USSR was based on coercion, organization, persuasion, and rewards. Therefore dissent resulted when a group's political power was threatened, weakened, or taken away completely (such as the deportations). This created in many regions a "militant-anomic (breakdown of society)", and the dissenters became the non-elites, economic have-nots, and groups with low social status in Soviet society. In many cases these were the ethnic minorities. The Chechens survived a sincere attempt by the authorities to wipe them off the map, and when they returned they were denied social, cultural, and political benefits. In that scenario, much like *Homo Sovieticus*, they learned to adapt and lean on the groups that could provide them with the religious and communal feeling that they deserved, whether it came from legal or illegal channels.³⁸

It is historical as well. Going back to Catherine the Great, many of those who were conquered by the Russians were treated with some modicum of equality. Two groups who were not were the Muslims of Central Asia and the North Caucasus. They were never allowed to be "citizens," but were given the title of "natives," or "nationalities." This had much to do with the idea that spiritual centers that were located far from Moscow were often viewed as suspicious "hereditary enemies," whether it be a church, synagogue, or mosque. Therefore, the minorities that opposed the regimes of Tsarist Russia and Soviet Russia, were "historical nations" with a strong national conscious.³⁹ Added to this was the idea that maintaining illegal practices and social traditions was a bulwark against assimilation. The population in Chechnya from 1959-1970 grew almost forty-five percent and one of the lessons of the twentieth century was that high birth rates in the subjects of empires were not conducive to colonialism. The Chechens were some of the least proficient in the Russian language, and had a low level of technical education. Once again, conditions that were favorable to the brotherhoods filling in the gaps that the government could not.⁴⁰

Although Soviet society had a tolerance for corrupt behavior there was still a social contract that existed between the state and its citizens who exchanged their personal freedoms for a supposed high degree of social order and “guarantees” of full employment, housing, low-cost medical care, and education. But *glasnost* and *perestroika* quickly showed that the police were in no way adept or supplied with the numbers, money, or weapons to stop the overt crime that was being committed on the streets. It was also quickly proven that organized criminals were more sophisticated than the police. Under Gorbachev, organized crime proliferated due to his anti-alcohol campaign, the worsening consumer-goods shortages under *perestroika*, and the widening economic differentiation between the wealthy and poor. In 1986, two million crimes were reported, about one-fifth of crimes in the United States that same year. But by 1989 the MVD, the Minister of Internal Affairs, revealed that 3.9 million crimes were reported, but only 2.5 were registered or looked into. In the first nine months of 1990, crime went up thirteen percent, and serious crimes went up twenty percent. This was especially true in places where ethnic conflicts had arisen: Nagorno-Karabagh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Chechnya, among others. In these places, not only did citizens acquire a certain immunity to violence and crime, but violence and crime became symbols of rebelling against the police, the army, and the old authorities. In the mayhem, police and army depots were raided, and old Soviet personnel began selling hardware for money and drugs. A perfect example was the drastic drop in the price of weapons as they flooded the market and anyone with any sort of acumen or desire could find one.⁴¹

There were a couple interesting phenomena unique to ethnic minority enclaves in the North Caucasus, Central Asia, and Jewish communities throughout the Union. As discussed with the *tariqas*, much of the commerce in these regions was run through a “shadow” economy with the help or blind eye of the authorities. The command economy was geared towards the military and not its citizens, therefore to get basic necessities many citizens did not go to the government for help, rather they went to the “unofficial, parallel” networks to get them. Even though Gorbachev’s reforms were supposed to change society, they were a long time coming, and citizens had to look in all places to find what they needed. The only difference with the thaw was that it was not ideological anymore. They no longer stole from the state or bribed state officials, it was just stealing or bribing to live, and the best way to do that was to form informal networks. These networks helped people amass wealth through

state resources from all levels of the government by siphoning off private projects and trade, guarding warehouses, raiding depots, dealing arms, and any other criminal activity that the authorities could not stop. In places like Chechnya, these informal networks were “crucial for organized crime...nepotism, mutual protection, and the development of a stable patron-client relationship that were all vital to the success of operations.”⁴²

There was also a certain ethos of organized crime that was inherent in the Soviet bureaucracy since the days of the revolution. It was an unlawful, violent group that took power after the chaotic civil war ruling through psychological and actual fear by imprisoning or killing its enemies. By the time of Stalin, there were quite a few functions that the state had compared to typical Mafioso organizations. Perhaps most importantly, was the inevitable retribution for the breaking of their laws, which the mafia subjugates all its members and people they deal with to. They ruled over a state for seventy years through deviance, misappropriation of government property, and bribery. Like any good Mafioso organization, they monopolized manufacturing and trade, and did not allow shady economics in their area per se, but rather shady markets; as long as they got a cut. It became evident that the bureaucracy was an entrenched powerful organization whose authoritarian qualities were passed off onto its people.⁴³

The entrenched corruption, proliferation of weapons, and the under-funded and inept police force was also exacerbated by the slow-changing criminal justice system. A good example was the law against protection, or *krysha*. Even into 1988, two years after the thaw, many crooks caught red-handed providing or forcing protection on businesses, especially Chechens in Moscow, could not be arrested because the law only covered state firms, not the new private businesses. To show they had panache many criminals even confessed to the practice knowing the police could do nothing to them. The once feared police state was no match for the criminals. But reforms and the co-ops (small, private businesses) did not create the need for gangs, the climate of opportunity did, and many took it. Government officials who used to steal by underpaying workers now just took the whole plant or factory they oversaw. Officials changed hats, became “democrats,” and were quite anxious for the shift to a free society based on private property. Because Gorbachev had told the nationalities to take all the independence they wanted many obliged and ethnic or tribal gangs popped up

everywhere. The Soviet Union was waning, and the “first major lesson of capitalism Russian-style was simply that crime pays.”⁴⁴

The proliferation of weapons; the fact that basic necessities had to be gotten through illegal means, the idea that informal networks were a good way of getting the necessities; and understaffed and inept police meant that vigilante groups, especially in the North Caucasus, took things into their own hands as groups operating in place of, or in opposition to, state law enforcers.⁴⁵ After studying their history and trying to deal with their rise in Moscow, the understaffed head Moscow detective Captain Yuri Nikishin, argued that the Chechens were made for the post-1989 world. “They had a strong clan system, based on family ties...Every Chechen youth was taught to respect and obey his elders and to distrust outsiders...They were also from a society that favored weapons in settling many disputes, they seemed to me very similar to the Sicilian mafia.” The comparison of Chechens as foreign Mafiosi extended even to their style and behavior. “They got their style—zoot suits, slicked hair—from Western mafia films, even though they had plenty of money to buy modern clothes.” Nikishin later states about the history of the Chechens from the deportations on, “What else could many of them do but turn to crime? The land left them wasn’t fertile, and they had big families. It was a logical step to turn the clans into criminal groups.”⁴⁶ As will be seen in the next chapter, when an unknown former Soviet Air Force Captain becomes president of the self-named breakaway Republic of Ichkeria, Nikishin’s words could not ring truer.

Map 3: The Major Cities and Villages of the Chechen Republic



Chapter 6: The Chechen “Brand”

There is not a specific schema for the rise of the “Chechen phenomenon,” but it can be partially explained by its hierarchy based on the authority of its elders, and its cold view of violence. In comparison with its Slavic and ethnic counterparts though, the structure of the group is loose and resembles a snowflake rather than a pyramid, and much of their strategic relations within the clans was brought together in their fight against the center (Moscow). Much like Chechen society, when a natural enemy showed itself the Chechens banded together to fight it. In November 1992, under the authority of “*Musa*” or “Old Man,” a meeting of at least 150 heads took place in the Moscow restaurant “Ukraine” to discuss how to coordinate all the groups throughout Russia. There presumably was discussed the way that the Chechen *bratva* could use their ethnicity in order to interconnect their criminal doings. This is something few other gangs did. It was also shown early that those in the *bratva* were vicious and violent, but that no matter their reputation they never fought or killed out of boredom. Fighting was a matter of principle, and this was professed throughout the ranks of the group, and murder was only done when completely necessary, or when paid.¹

The fluidness of structure also allowed the group to adapt to new conditions while many of the leaders lived in the shadows away from the authorities. The group was connected through mutual dependence on family, the *teip* structure, and religion, and this helped in making sure that accomplices were never named. Throughout criminal Russia, the solidarity was inspiring, and as the Chechens became bigger many sought to work under them. Likewise, in some sections of Chechen society, these men were looked upon as heroes, like the *abreks* of old.² The disciplined and patriarchal group also required its members to conform to certain rules and expectations helping cement their place in the new society. As the Soviet Union dissolved, and Yeltsin’s government could not enforce law and order it was only natural that someone would fill the gaps. The rise of organized crime was a reflection of the absence of a credible and legitimate source of order. Because of the absence organized criminal groups took it upon themselves to legitimize their activities in the eyes of the community. The Chechens did this by saying that their criminal activities against the state were a blow against imperialism, making it personal.³

Due to Soviet culture, trade and other economic activity in the private sector were not considered prestigious. Therefore, when it was possible to create coop shops (private

enterprises created out of old Soviet *kolkhozes*) and restaurants in cities marginal groups were eager to do so. This is how the Chechens took advantage, through *teips* and kinship they created a social network that supported all legal and illegal enterprises through the collecting of initial capital, to receive licenses, and to find access to state structures. They became owners of food and car shops that dealt largely in cash and could easily be run through the shadow economy. The kinship factor also dealt with men who were released from the newly-defunct Soviet prisons able to make contact with other criminals while quickly learning how to meld into the criminal community. Lastly, “ethnic mafias,” especially the Chechens, shared a common view within its community about the nature of social life. This meant that all secured contracts were based on personal responsibility and the tradition of severe punishment for violation of said agreements. The law and the authorities were not involved or even thought of when making the contracts. In 1991, immediately after coops were legalized Chechens dominated many of the legal markets in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Rostov-on-Don, and other cities. Although this was technically legal, it allowed them to create private security forces that were special armed bands used to protect themselves and their interests, making it very hard to distinguish from legal and illegal armed bands.⁴

The Chechen clans formed a system based on collective reputation used for social capital, and have been compared to alumni at an Ivy League school: they used their networks to offer the hope of finding a job, a business partner, or even an acceptable bride. Perhaps most importantly, they also helped evaluate and recruit young men into the fold. Since the only bureaucracy that mattered were the elders and clan leaders, clan reputation and “references” guided judgment and built trust, and no one was eager to damage their own clan’s reputation. Traditionally, in places like Sicily and Chechnya, labor migrations followed the pattern of highlanders coming down to seek additional income as seasonal workers, guards, mercenaries, or bandits. Many developed dual households in communities of part-time laborers, and this became a sub-culture whose norms centered on a “team.” The team was gathered around a seasoned man invested in the quasi-parental authority and responsibilities. A fraternity was formed within the internal ranks based on individual merit and kinship that provided discipline and cohesiveness. This helped explain the extraordinary success of the Chechen *bratva*. Young, poor, under-educated, jobless Chechen men, went far past the villages this time looking for employment. For example, Russia’s Public Enemy

Number One in the 1990's, Shamil Basayev, was a college drop-out turned computer salesman. Former Grozny Mayor, Chechen Vice-Premier, later President Dudayev ally-turned enemy, and now Matrosskaya Tishina prison inmate, Beslan Gantemirov, was also a man who could not find the education or the job he desired. The field of what Russian scholar Vadim Volkov calls "violent entrepreneurship,"⁵ was too good to pass up for young men in this situation. In addition, "the tradition of clan solidarity, Chechen masculinity, and ritualized violence surely played a big role in enabling them to do this; providing a set of skills that were advantageous in the criminal underworld."⁶

Leaders of the Chechen *obschina* (community) tended to only command their own personal gangs, while merely exerting some type of moral authority as an *abrek* over the rest of the *bratva*. In general, internecine rivalries were rare, and like Chechen society, most disputes were resolved through the negotiations of respected elders. Constituent gangs were small groups built around charismatic leaders like the already discussed Khozh Nukhaev, Nikolai "Little Bird" Suleimanov, or Movladi "Lenin" "Lord" or "The Italian" Atlangeriev. Many times these larger groups were named after the district they dominated, such as *Avtomobilnaya*, *Tsentrlnaya*, *Ostankinskaya*, and *Yuzhnoy-Portovy*. An example of this would have been a Moscow-based group under the *abrek* nicknamed "Malik." His group was comprised of 22 core members, of whom seven were his direct kin and nine more came from his *teip*, the Yalkhoi. They were then contained within the larger *Ostankinskaya* network of the same clan. Remaining true to their *banditiz* roots, the Chechen *mafīya* operated mainly within Russia excelling at extortion, protection racketeering, and as will be seen later, kidnapping for ransom. Although there have been the exceptions of arms sales to Latino organized groups, and supplying the Italian mafia with drugs, on the whole the Chechen groups outside of Chechnya did not and do not actively seek out other world criminal organizations. This is largely because of their reputation, and there is no need to expand outside of Russia as they usually work with other criminals from a position of strength, not inferiority or equality.⁷

This also allowed them to "franchise" other gangs into their network, many of which had no Caucasians in them. In return, the gang who used the Chechen name paid a cut of their earnings and took orders from the nearest Chechen leader. As British journalist and organized crime expert Misha Glenny, and Russian organized crime expert Mark Galeotti

argued, the Chechens created a “McMafia.” They made a brand name for themselves that was just as apparent in the underworld as companies such as McDonald’s and Nike. This of course meant that it made it so the “Chechen” *obschiina* was not entirely made up of North Caucasians, but the Chechens made sure that was not a problem. If they sold the moniker “Chechen” to protection rackets or “entrepreneurs” in other towns the group would have to carry out their word in every dealing. If a non-Chechen group claimed a Chechen connection, “but did not carry out its threats to the letter, it was devaluing the brand. Then the original Chechen would come after them.”⁸

*The "Godfather of the People"*⁹

In August 1990, in the city of Ufa in Bashkortostan, the then maverick Boris Yeltsin was looking for allies in his fight for power with the president of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev. With this end, he invited Russia's twenty-one republics to demand real sovereignty from the soon-to-be defunct Soviet Union. In the most famous of lines he told them to, "Take as much power as you yourselves can swallow."¹⁰ In what would become a historical twist of fate, the Republic of Chechnya took him literally, and in a referendum in October 1991 an ex-Soviet Air Force Major-General, Dzhokhar Dudayev, was elected the republic's first president. Yeltsin had earlier sent him there personally as a loyal cadre who would help him in his fight against Gorbachev, along with the recently appointed First Secretary of the Chechen-Ingush Republic, Doku Zavgayev. Zavgayev was the first Chechen to be appointed to this title, and many were thrilled at first, but he was found to be corruptible on a large scale. Little did Yeltsin know, Dudayev would soon become one of the most maligned fugitives and outlaws of the Yeltsin regime while being accused of corruption himself.¹¹

Days after Dudayev was elected president he unilaterally declared the republic's independence from the Russian Federation. Meanwhile, in October, the little known Soviet Air Force General, Dzhokhar Dudayev, was elected as the first president in Chechen history, and immediately proclaimed a sovereign Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. One month later, on 7 November, newly elected Russian President Boris Yeltsin decreed a state of emergency due to the criminality that was enveloping the region, and for the safety of its citizens. Russian troops were to be sent in on 9 November to normalize the situation and look for illegally

armed groups, munitions, technical war materiel, and radioactive material.¹² The next day, the Chechen parliament called Yeltsin's decree an illegal, imperialistic, totalitarian move on a sovereign nation. They then gave Yeltsin a day to rescind the decree and to remove all armed troops from the Republic. He also made sure that the Russians knew where the borders of the Republic of Ichkeria (Chechnya) began and ended.¹³

Eventually Yeltsin had to capitulate as Dudayev's National Guard did not allow the Russian troops to leave the Grozny airport, but the republic was in dire straits. A nation-state was something that the Chechen people were not used to. Rules and laws handed down by a centralized government, whether it be Russian or Chechen, was anathema to the tribal, clan-like society. It had been historically proven that trying to integrate all the citizens into a national system of laws, administration, and education would not work. This was universally true when dealing with crime. An example was how the high criminality in the mountains was handled. If a crime were committed in the highlands the lowland or Russian authorities would bring a complaint to the Political Agent. This agent would then go to the village of the accused, and have a local adjudicate the matter. Should the perpetrator not show up his property would be confiscated until he went to the local courts. If this failed, his *teip* was held accountable and if they could not find the instigator they would be forced to make a payment of a certain, stipulated fee. If the *teip* could pay the fee they would usually be compensated by the authorities. All this showing that especially in the highlands, there was more local, social control over crime to not only try and minimize its occurrence, but also to establish social legitimacy of law enforcement that the government could not provide.¹⁴

Soon after, a western reporter compared Dudayev to Panama's drug-running, military dictator General Manuel Noriega. Here were two irrational, charismatic, military leaders who thumbed their noses at the bigger power. In Dudayev's case, the irrationality would stem from declaring independence on his own and warning the Russian government where Chechnya's borders were. The snag in this analogy though would be that Russia did not act decisively like the US did, and Chechnya would grow stronger. So much stronger that one Russian parliament member lamented, "Russian politicians are now afraid of Dudayev and other Chechen leaders."¹⁵ After the failed attempt by Yeltsin to control the situation, Dudayev was officially sworn in as president, and he made it clear that he was not going to play second fiddle. At his 10 November inauguration, while swearing on the Koran, he

warned that if a new war began in the Caucasus, “the people in Moscow won’t sleep peacefully in their beds.”¹⁶

One of Dudayev’s first moves as president after declaring independence was to release over 640 hardened criminals, including murderers and illegal arms dealers, from Grozny prison. It is important to remember that those jailed for illegal weapons were considered to be breaking Soviet laws, but not Chechen ones, as weapons-bearing was and is part of the culture. Many of these men would become his personal bodyguards, or the 300-strong “Chechen National Guard,” loyal only to him. Once these men were armed, they would be the force that kept the Russian troops in the airport, and would lead many in Moscow to consider the new president as the leader of *banditz* and thieves. They would also help in making the republic, especially the Grozny airport, a hub for the heroin trade. One route began in the Golden Triangle (Burma, Thailand, and Laos) where the opium and heroin was transported to a Russian naval base at Cam Ranh Bay and handled by the Vietnamese. It would then be shipped to the eastern Russian port of Nakhodka where Chechen *bratva* would handle it, and send it to the Grozny airport for distribution throughout Russia and Europe. Likewise, much of the heroin and opium came from the Golden Crescent (Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran) and was distributed from the Republic.¹⁷

Once pictures of armed, ex-prisoners roaming the streets and the airport came to light, the Russian media attacked. From that point on, everything that the Chechen government did was seen as suspect, and the media began portraying Dudayev as a dangerous lunatic running a nation of thugs, criminals, drug runners, arms merchants, and smugglers. He was seen travelling with these “security specialists” at all times, and his compound was monitored by the well-armed and tough looking fighters.¹⁸ In his *Midnight Diaries*, Boris Yeltsin articulated that nothing in Dudayev’s dandyish appearance – the hat, the tie, the mustache – suggested that he was an “elected warlord,” but that is what he was. Under his guidance Chechnya turned into a haven of banditry, and it had become a source of pride to him. Yeltsin argues at least he tried to stop organized crime from influencing the daily lives of Russians, but Dudayev and his government overtly helped the *banditz* disappear with their cash, hostages, and weapons into a black hole. The Chechen government had become its own mafia, and it was Dudayev who truly was, “The ‘Godfather’ of the people.”¹⁹

According to journalists Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, under Dudayev Chechnya had become a “fantastic customs free zone.”²⁰ In the Grozny bazaar, a person could find Italian dresses, French perfumes or Japanese electronics. While at the other end, and in broad daylight, an interested buyer could get a Makarov pistol for \$600 or a Kalashnikov machine gun for \$500 apiece. It was not just *bratva* who were taking advantage of the opportunities though. A group of individuals formed a ‘tour’ company and leased an airplane from Ukraine. They began to advertise all the places that they could fly, including, Turkey, the Middle East, and China. The ‘shuttles’ as the traders were known, would buy goods and bring them back, dodging customs, and resell undercutting Russian prices by a third; all helped by a \$20,000 bribe to the Grozny airport for passage. At its peak, there were two flights a day with the cost of a week-long trip amounting to \$400 plus 150,000 rubles. By 1994, about half of the adult population was involved in some type of trade similar to this, including trained engineers who could get no work.²¹

This was no surprise as the mid-1980's saw unemployment become chronic in the Republic (it was still officially as ASSR at that time). Every year thousands of people were leaving villages for other cities in other republics. Secretary Zavgayev called this a humiliation and promised to make a place for these "working resources" by creating new industries and building projects. This did not happen, and by 1991 official unemployment was estimated at 100,000 people, or fifteen percent of the working force. Unofficially it was close to 200,000 people, or thirty percent of the near 700,000 citizens living in Chechnya. That is colossal unemployment, and many of those unemployed would become the base for Dudayev's rising radical nationalism.²² It was not just Chechens leaving the republic however, but also ethnic Russians as well. This was devastating to the economy because traditionally Russians had taken over many of the industrial and technical jobs. In 1989, in the Sunzhenskovo *raion* (district) alone, 60,000 Russians exited from the republic due to the loss of jobs and ethnic clashes with Chechens and Ingushetians. Things became more tenuous for Russians as Dudayev came to the helm as many of his policies focused on making their life untenable and dangerous. At the same time, unemployment and ethnic clashes were just two of the many problems that the national politicians had to address in 1991 as they began to form a self-running government.²³

*The Guns of Grozny*²⁴

To many ethnic Russians, Grozny had never been a Chechen city. It was created by Ermolov in 1818 as a Russian fortress, and into 1989 the population of the capital city was fifty-six percent Russian, thirty-percent Chechen, and five-percent Ingush. Historically Russians had the best jobs in the republic's political institutions, the petroleum industry, and made up almost the entire scientific elite. Discrimination was rampant, and ethnic minorities had to take jobs they could find in the service industries, motor transport, or trading industries, and were looked upon with contempt by ethnic Russians for their "commercial opportunism," or criminal tendencies. But after 1990, the situation had changed, as one Russian oil-man contested:

"Since the beginning of *perestroika*, with each passing year Russians feel increasingly less protected... Today a top man who is Russian is a rarity in the republic. Practically no Russians are employed in trade, services, or the MVD (Interior Ministry)... The new rulers promise to guarantee the protection of citizen's rights irrespective of nationality... But if you walk in the street even in broad daylight you will notice that drunks harass Russian girls, not Vainakh (Chechen) ones, and insolent youths test their fighting skills on a Russian boy, not a Vainakh one—all of this under the indifferent glances of passers-by."²⁵

Later in August 1991, as the Soviet Union dissolved, so did some of the key aspects of Chechen life. The collapse of the Soviet economy forced many to seek the informal networks of contraband that were run by local warlords. The pillars of *adat* and elder, patriarchal traditions began to rapidly erode. Young males posed a particular problem, as more than eighty-percent were not employed and could not escape the increasing life of poverty. It was soon found out that the easiest way to wealth was through illegal means, especially the use of violence. This created an attitude throughout the population of cynicism, and the ruthlessly pragmatic gang-like patterns of peer socialization frequently produced groups of young men that were compared to "packs of young wolves."²⁶

With the end of the USSR, the Red Army began the long process of demilitarizing and getting rid of military materiel. On 29 May 1992, Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev formally agreed to leave Chechnya half of its weapons. In actuality, it was an attempt at a dignified cover-up of the fact that almost all weapons had been lost through bribes or brazenly stolen from supply depots. In any case, Dudayev received: 40,000 automatic weapons and machine guns, 153 cannons and mortars, 42 tanks, 18 Grad rocket launchers, 55 armored

personnel carriers, several training aircraft and helicopters, and 130,000 grenades. Because there was no formal army, much of the equipment ended up in the hands of the population, and more importantly rival gangs that would soon fight Dudayev for power, including Labazanov's and Suleimanov's.²⁷

Grachev's decree was in response to a few earlier incursions that the Red Army could not, or did not, want to stop. It is not known whether Dudayev's people were behind it, but on 6 February 1992 residents numbering 1,500 attacked military unit No. 3394 capturing over 3,000 pieces of small arms and 3 million pieces of ammo. A day later 200 locals attacked and captured 75 submachine guns, two machine guns, 78 guns and large ammo, took food, and destroyed the facilities. On 8 February, bands of Dudayev's men attacked and plundered several cantonments using women and children as shields. The president also received weapons from anti-Russian Zviad Gamsakurdhia, the first democratically elected president of Georgia. His emissaries and businessmen were also involved in illegal delivery of weapons from Ukraine, as well as Iskender Gamidov, the ex-Interior Minister of Azerbaijan and the leader of the Islamic extremist group The Grey Wolves. In a little under six months, the Chechen president had created a well-armed, loyal, anti-Russian population looking for independence.²⁸

Later that month, the Head of the Chechen Parliament Kh. Akhmadov, admitted that things in the republic had become "complicated," but that most of it had to do with provocations from the republic's enemies. He did not specify who the enemies were, only that they were armed groups and hooligan elements that were committing attacks on forces and capturing arms and war materiel, also admitting they were making life hard for the normal people of the republic.²⁹ Two months later, a government report came out detailing the weapons and machinery that had been "privatized" from the Soviet Army. The list included, 2 Lunar tactical rockets; 43 Soviet T-62 and T-72 tanks; 36 BMP-1 and BMP-2 tanks; 30 BTR-70 tanks; 121 artillery rockets; almost 42,000 guns, including 18,832 AK-47's, 10, 581 pistols, and 533 Dragon sniper rifles; 138 grenade launchers; over 25,000 rounds of ammunition, some 150,000 grenades; 111 L-39 airplanes, 149 L-29 airplanes; and so on. To save some face, the Russian authorities made it sound like all of this materiel was officially "given" to the Chechen authorities when in fact most of it had been stolen or sold.³⁰

In that same year it was estimated that another 10,000 guns were leaving Moscow every week on unregulated flights landing in the Grozny airport. The local commander of Russian forces estimated that there were at least 150,000 guns at large in the capital city of only 400,000 citizens, and that much of the arms dealing was done in the Grozny Bazaar, a five-minute walk from Dudayev's offices. Although there was never a conclusive link, within two years of his presidency, Chechens owned more than 500 flats in Moscow, an estimated 140 businesses and joint ventures, and half a dozen hotels. By mid-1992, according to the Moscow police, the three principal Chechen clans in Moscow jointly owned a bank with reserves estimated in the hundreds of millions of rubles. The Russian Ministry claimed that by this time 10-15 million rubles were being funneled into the republic from Moscow every week, and the Chechens had become the leading arms-dealers in post-Soviet society. When he was asked why there were so many guns in Grozny, the president replied, "Everyone has a gun here, it is our culture, and if I tried to disarm them I would be in trouble... The Russians say we're all gangsters. But how can a gangster swear on the Koran?"³¹

Grozny had become a violent place. The Chechen parliament, headed by Chairman Akhmadov, the Minister of Security S. Albakhov, the Deputy Director of Parliament K.H. Pashaev, and the Head of the Trade Committee M.G. Ghamzatov, discussed the criminality that was not only occurring in Grozny, but other regions including the violent town of Chernorech'ye in the Grozny *raion*. Here endless provocations and shootouts had led the city to become a sanctuary for burglars, *banditz*, thieves, and murderers. It truly was a city with no laws, and many of the local inhabitants had been forced to run or try to avoid the "revelry of the criminals." The city had also become a launching point for criminal gangs to carouse around places in the republic where things of value could be stolen. According to the parliament, the situation in the republic had become a "moral, and psychological catastrophe."³²

The idea that many traditions had been lost, or morphed into something different, was apparent to many of the older generation. Kidnapping for ransom, owning guns, and *kalym*, were all time-honored traditions that were making comebacks. But many bride-thefts had been seen by the population as nothing more than pure lawlessness and rape. As the economy worsened, women were told to stay home and get an education while young men were not told to learn, but rather to learn how to fight. People began to complain about how the youths

lacked manners, the ideals of traditional customs, and possessed no virtue for legality. As one anonymous woman opined, “What should we all do about a generation containing so many uneducated and socially maladjusted brutes?”³³ Likewise, renowned chronicler of Chechnya, Anatol Lieven, had a discussion with Haji Mahomet, a Chechen elder of Mekhekhi, and it went the same way. “Today,” the elder said, “the young have no respect for tradition. Youths hit each other more easily, they use their weapons more easily, and part of this is because of alcohol, and of crime – (and it is) thanks to Soviet rule.”³⁴

Although drugs and guns were important products to the Dudayev regime, the most precious of all commodities in the world, and the main source of wealth to the Republic, was oil. Oil extraction in Chechnya dated back a century, with production growing throughout the mid-20th century to a 1971 record of 21 million tons, second only to Azerbaijan in the Soviet Union. The oil was of such good quality that the Soviet Union exported it to the Vatican to use in its lamps. After peaking in the early 1980’s, production stabilized by 19910 at 4-5 million tons, but upon the declaration of independence it would begin to go down.³⁵ One reason for the output decline was Yeltsin’s blockade. Siberian oil sent to Grozny refineries was cut off, causing production to drop from 18 million tons in 1991 to 1.5 million tons in 1994, the year the war began. The Russians however, did allow Chechen oil to continue to be exported through the Novorossiisk-Boliv pipeline, sharing the proceeds with Dudayev’s government. In 1992, oil production was around 3.5 million tons, with 6.5 million tons of other petroleum products refined. The following year 2.6 million tons were extracted, with the figure falling more rapidly in 1994 to 1.2 million tons.³⁶ The onset of armed conflict with Russia brought the industry to a virtual standstill. The daily output of oil in December 1994 had fallen to fewer than 6,500 barrels per day, this was due in large part to workers joining the defense of their homeland. The Russian Ministry of Fuels and Energy reported that at the beginning of December no more than 100 of Chechnya’s 1,500 wells were actually producing, and those that were producing were being siphoned off illegally by those daring enough to try it.³⁷

Many Chechen and Russian government officials had planned to rebuild the Republic with the vast oil reserves, but where there should have been progress, in eighteen months despair set in. With that in mind, the Dudayev regime nationalized the oil industry. To outside observers, what this had done was make his government an alliance of corrupt party

officials and racketeers from the shadow economy. Oil extraction had been increased by the government to bring more hard currency into the republic. The revenues though, had all but disappeared as the allocation of oil products were made by government ministers. One corrupt minister was alleged to have stolen at least \$11 million by himself. Salman Khasimikov, the Minister of State Security, approximated that at least \$300 million was missing from oil sales in those eighteen months alone. He added that it was not hard to find out who was benefitting from this as a person could walk into the presidential palace, visit many senior government official's offices, and see brochures for luxury cars and satellite phones.³⁸

Timur Abubakarov, Dudayev's Minister of Economics and Finance, argued that the regime's plan was to make the oil for the people. They realized right away that the oil question was the answer to many of the republic's needs. Once the oil industry was steady and running at its full potential then belief in the political system would follow. Simply put, achieving economic prosperity would bring political stability and togetherness. The regime had made steps to help with this by patching up old and corroded pipelines, putting security guards throughout the republic to keep looters from stealing, and modernizing refineries and plants. But in the end, no matter how hard he and other officials worked, there was just too much corruption and thievery to maintain a solvable government industry. The economic and human loss was plain. People who stole oil were being killed for the commodity, and it was being stolen from all corners of the pipelines. From one Grozny refinery alone, in a twenty-four hour span, six-hundred tons of light oil products had been stolen. The next twenty-four hours saw 1.5 thousand tons stolen from the pipelines being shipped from the factory, never to be found.³⁹

In his memoirs, Yevgeny Primakov, the former Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service (FIS), argued that from the beginning of Dudayev's ascension the republic fell into a mire of criminality. He goes on to say, "Violence and arbitrary rule prevailed. Criminals were released from prisons. The economy was destroyed. The oil sector was plundered. Agriculture collapsed. Unemployment reached unheard of levels to more than two-thirds of able-bodied men and women."⁴⁰

That year Russian Deputy Prime Minister and one of the authors of the Russian Constitution, Sergei Shakrai, was interviewed about Chechnya. When asked about the

Dudayev regime he lamented, “What have they gotten out of the fight for independence? What did those fighters win? There’s no peace, no government, no democracy... In Chechnya there is a gradual rise now of the so-called Dudayev regime, and they are the very representatives who have created a criminal free economic zone.” The economics for this argument were there. In 1993 alone, of the 9.4 trillion falsely made rubles in the Russian Federation the MVD estimated that 3.7 went to Chechen nationalists. Of the false money that was made in Russia that year almost ninety-percent came from Chechnya. In the first six months of the credit sphere in the Chechen Republic that year, it was discovered that three-thousand of the transactions were misappropriated for the sum of almost 900 million rubles. This was equal to almost forty-percent of all bank transactions.⁴¹

Many political watchers at the time argued that Russia had very little interest in Chechnya’s claim for independence until Dudayev was elected and began acting unilaterally. In September 1991, he raided the Soviet All-National Congress of Chechens, and killed the Party Chief Vitali Kusenko. Then he declared independence and that is when Yeltsin sent in troops. Soon after, Ingushetia voted to break away from the republic, pockets of violence erupted, and Dudayev did nothing to improve the plight of non-Chechens or to arrest any violent and lawless actions. It was as the economy deteriorated, and Russian engineers and other skilled workers began to be expelled that Russia took a piqued interest in the affairs of the small republic that was legally still in the Russian Federation.⁴²

One of the main inherited problems was that the Chechens could move goods and themselves in and out with ease, and the people who were courageous enough to cross the border for drugs, iron, oil, guns, and so forth, gained huge profits. At the same time, Moscow was quite aware that the authorities lacked the will or the way to patrol all the borders of the new Russian Federation. The new border stretched over 60,000 kilometers, whereas the Soviet Union’s border was only 46,000 kilometers, and the authorities did not have the sufficient funds to add more surveillance, control stations, troops, guards, or infrastructure. Train-jackings, a Chechen custom, had made the Russian Internal Ministry powerless as daily occurrences were costing haulers almost 1 billion rubles a year. The last problem Moscow had was specifically with Dudayev. Since he had come to power he released prisoners and put members of his *teip* in positions of power, many of whom had no experience or background for their new positions. The president had become, “little more than a figurehead for an

alliance of *teips*, the same clans that also formed the backbone of Chechen organized crime.”⁴³

The alliance between *teips* became obvious as Dudayev began appointing people to important government positions who were allied with his family, while others who did not have an alliance with Dudayev’s clan became his enemies. The Minister of Oil Production Sultan Albakov, and the Minister of National Security were from his own Yalkhoroi clan. From the allied Chonkhoi *teip* came two of Dudayev’s allies-turned enemies, criminal boss Yaragi Mamadaev, and the former mayor of Grozny and Vice-Premier of Chechnya, Beslan Gantemirov. Gantemirov, who was a certified criminal, convicted rapist, and shady leader of a paramilitary group of criminals became the leader of the “National Guard.”⁴⁴ Dudayev’s soon-to-be enemies were from clans that were not associated with his *teip*. Enemies that included the second-most powerful politician in Russia, the speaker of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR Ruslan Khasbulatov from the Kharachoi clan. Along with him, two Chechen politicians from the Nizhaloi clan, Umar Avtorkhanov and Doku Zavgayev, the Communist leader of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR at the time of dissolution. The Russians derogatorily called this *teipovshchina*, meaning “*teip* regime,” and it had undertones of criminality in its meaning. This became more the case once Dudayev claimed he was bringing back *teip* relations and traditions of old. The Russians claimed, and rightly so, that the clannish infighting was for selfish ends, and that the endgame was to fill the power vacuum that had been created. Dudayev wanted to take control of the natural resources and economy through joint-ventures called *khlebnim*, roughly translated as “bread-ventures,” meaning money makers.⁴⁵

The President also invited the leader of the radical nationalist Vainakh Democratic Party, Zelimkhan Yanderbiev from the infamously criminal southern mountain Keloï *teip* to join the government. The Tsarnaev brothers of the Boston Marathon bombings were from this *teip*, and Yanderbiev would not only serve as the chief ideologue for Dudayev, but was also purportedly the chief Chechen emissary to al-Qaeda and the Gulf States. He also brought Yusup Soslambekov into the inner-circle, a onetime chairman of the Chechen parliament and convicted rapist. The charismatic Soslambekov became the demagogue for the group.⁴⁶

Lastly, was the violent, charismatic Ruslan Labazanov. The “Robin Hood” of Chechnya served in the Red Army, and studied at the Krasnodar Institute of Physical

Education where he trained in hand-to-hand combat. In 1990, he was arrested for murder in Rostov-on-Don, and in 1991 was transferred to the Grozny prison isolation ward, there he became the head of a group of pro-Dudayev inmates. In November of that year, he started an uprising and consequently escaped, and although it cannot be proven, many people believe with the express help of Dudayev. Upon his escape, he became part of the “presidential guard” and was quickly assigned the role of captain of the guard and the official head of security for the president. From 1992 to 1993 Labazanov was also in charge of the selling and trafficking of illegal arms for the president in the North Caucasus and Transcaucasia. He became well-known for stealing from the rich, many of whom were in Dudayev's government, and then distributing the money himself to the poor in the streets of Grozny.⁴⁷

The Moscow criminal capo became the captain of Dudayev's “National Guard” in 1992 only to have a falling out with him a year later over Dudayev's incursion on the Chechen Parliament. In a 1994 interview with *Moskovskiye Novosti*, Labazanov would claim that during the turbulent times of 1991, he escaped from a Rostov prison, commenced to help over 600 prisoners escape, and that they all were loyal to him after that. He then met with Dudayev, and these were the men who made up most of the president's bodyguards in the early days.⁴⁸

Being an ethnic Chechen, Dudayev based his political power on a blend of Islamic sentiment and Chechen nationalism. He tried to incorporate Islamic legal norms into the new constitution, but in March 1992 the Chechen parliament stressed that the constitution was to be a secular one. In addition, the official clergy had already opposed Dudayev's domestic and foreign policy, and a half year earlier an independent muftiat (group of Islamic legal scholars) had been formed. This immediately began a so-called turf war amongst Chechnya's Muslim population. On 14 October, a council of imam (religious leaders, usually of a mosque) selected a new mufti and founded under his leadership an “Independent Religious Authority of the Muslims of the Chechen Republic” that criticized the economic slowdown and decline of rule of law that was occurring. In response, pro-Dudayev national, Islamic parties were also being formed with the two most important being the “Islamic Cultural Centre of the Chechen Republic,” and the “Islamic Path (Way)” party. The latter being founded by Beslan Gantemirov, who would also become one of the president's fiercest enemies when fighting between the factions began.⁴⁹

Islam would play an important role in Dudayev's scheme for the republic. Not only did he swear on the Koran when he was inaugurated, but he would later proclaim it an Islamic republic. At the same time, a revival of religiosity swept through all areas of the former Soviet Union, and in Chechnya many *tariqatists* came out from the underground, and returned to the political scene. An Islamic turf-war of sorts began as the Naqshbandi quickly distanced themselves from Dudayev, and the first Chechen Mufti, Muhammad Bashir, refused to back him. Because of this, the president turned to the more disadvantaged and violent Qadiriya. Another substantial reason was that Dudayev's brother Bekmurza was a regional leader of the Qadiriya.⁵⁰

To put family and clan members in positions of power was not only common, but it was also seen as moral and right. To reiterate, for the most part Chechens believe there are two major classifications in the system, *teip-1* and *teip-2*. The first is a large kin group consisting of hundreds of families and residents in a certain area. The second is the extended family, including all relations with whom a person maintains kin relations. In most cases, especially in *teip-2*, members will live close to each other, and become a social organism so if one moves up the others can follow. This is quite important during times of high unemployment as it reduces the need for everyone in the clan to have a job during a given amount of time. It also is important in politics because they are based on personal loyalty and family, while paramilitary groups loyal to the family will gain their own piece of land and place in the power structure.⁵¹

In the capacity of "Godfather" Dudayev was a man who tried to bring wealth into the republic whether legal or illegal. One economic scheme that did not come to fruition was to build a pipeline that would have started in Chechnya and stretched to the Arab world to sell them water. Despite the obvious difficulties of the project, Dudayev argued that because production had fallen in the republic by sixty percent in 1992, it was up to the government to build back an infrastructure. However, due to the fact that no nations beside the Taliban officially recognized the new Chechen Republic, and therefore received no economic aide from the outside world, the ruling group had to turn to the criminal world rather than legitimate foreign nations. In response, the government began committing bank fraud and exporting oil illegally. In two days in March 1993, two planes loaded with 2.5 billion rubles withdrawn from a bank in Estonia and intended for destruction were allegedly flown to

Grozny. Taimaz Abubakarov, the Minister of Economics and Finance, acknowledged that the republic did receive assistance from the Baltic State, but that it was a legitimate trade as only 700 million rubles, and 30 million rubles worth of butter were sent to Chechnya, in exchange for lubricating oil and diesel.⁵²

Likewise, the MVD estimated that the republic made profits of \$800-900 million in 1993 alone, none of which appeared in the national budget or the Chechen National Bank. A former anonymous Chechen official said the republic received billions of dollars from the sale of oil and petroleum products in 1993-1994, and none of it was invested in the economy. Furthermore, the Chechen Deputy in the Russian Duma, Ibragim Suleimanov, asserted that during Dudayev's four-year reign the sale of 22 million tons of oil went straight into the president's coffers.⁵³ It is not exactly known how the large-scale theft was done, but it seems that in most cases a contract would be signed between Abubakarov, and a mythical representative of a cultural-merchant company by the name of A. Krivoshapkina. The Chechen government paid this fictitious person in gold, five tons of it throughout the time period equaling close to 2.78 trillion rubles, or \$800 million dollars. The scheme was the government was taking public money to pay itself for the oil it was selling, while illegally selling the oil to illegitimate sources and putting that money in their private accounts; they were getting paid twice for transactions that the public should have benefited from.⁵⁴

Yet another scheme was thought up by the group, and they used Dudayev's brother to try and finalize the deal. In February 1993, the president sent his brother and a *teip* member Ruslan Utsieva to London to meet with an American named Joseph Rypien, the president of a company called Investors Corporation. The two Chechens asked Rypien to invest \$250 million dollars in a Dudayev arrangement to build a pipeline without Russia, and he used the guarantee of oil as collateral. According to Interpol, however, Rypien had been in jail for four months because of links to the American mafia, and was being watched while in London. In the meantime, while Dudayev and Utsieva were in London, the two Chechen brothers who were looking to buy stinger missiles for the Azerbaijanis were murdered, and the president called his brother and Utsieva home before any deal was finalized.⁵⁵

That same year, Chechen Aslambek Aslakhanov, the former head of the MVD, was sent by Yeltsin and Khasbulatov to work with the National Congress of the Chechen People. He was in the parliament building when it was successfully raided by Dudayev's men that

created the eventual split between Dudayev and many of his “cronies,” as Aslakhanov describes them. While he was there, he had many conversations with the president in which he could never get an answer about the almost 1 billion rubles worth of oil that was missing. In one conversation, Dudayev was asked about the criminality surrounding him, and throughout the republic, his answer was, “Real men have to bring home money, cars, and things like that.” The MVD leader argued that not one school was built, or apartment complex for the needy, pensioners did not receive their state money, teachers were not paid, and health-care was completely absent. The following is an observation one anonymous Chechen politician told him about the “freedom and democracy” that was supposed to have flourished in the independent republic:

“(Dudayev) Seized the reins of government into his hands, with his clan-mafia government, calculating on the strength of arms and the domination of the people. Creating his own *oprichniks*, armed to the teeth, calling themselves his “guards.” And they are running everything. Our revolution for freedom began and now it is run by criminals and it is chaos, humiliating the Chechen people. Before we knew it...it was an environment of money, plundering of the government from the people, sitting in their chairs like fat-cats; criminals and numerous marauders. Then more than ninety percent of honest workers suffer losses because of them. Then they ‘grabbed’ stores/shops building and construction, meanwhile enriching themselves on the trade of silk, guns, and drugs.”⁵⁶

According to the Russians, Dudayev’s armed “guards” wreaked havoc on the non-Chechen population. The President’s “*mafia*” began evicting people out of their houses for no reason and without compensation. On the presidential palace walls there was graffiti that proclaimed, “Don’t buy houses from Russians, those house will be ours all the same.” The mortuaries were filled with disfigured corpses without ID’s, and many of them had to be thrown into common graves. Perhaps the scariest idea though, according to Russian sources, was that a feeling of fear never left the people because, “for Dudayev’s men, killing a Russian to get his car was simpler than swatting a fly.”⁵⁷

In 1994, in the Assinovskoi Synzhenskovo *raion*, which had a high ethnic Russian population, over sixty families reported they were victims of robberies, thefts, and other assortment of crimes. None of which saw anyone arrested. One Russian pensioner was attacked and robbed in his home by two masked men, and reportedly died later at the hospital due to the stress of it all. In March of that year, a man by the name of Voistryakov had his house broken into while an armed man pointed a gun at him and said three times, “Uncle, we

are working on a time schedule, every Russian family is not safe.” Then he left and took the man’s car.⁵⁸

Runup to the Battle for Grozny

What Dudayev took over in 1991 is what sociologist Charles King called an “almost state,” with many "black spots" throughout. Organized crime operated at a very high level because without a functioning government gangs can act as that entity and provide protection for the consumers and enforce contracts in the burgeoning capitalistic society. The reason for the lack of a practical government was because the Russian Federation had considered it part of the republic. As Chechnya was the outer reaches of the Federation, there were little to no border guards, corruption among the Soviet/Russian government officials working there was high, and there was a feeling of impunity since the criminal courts did not extend that far out. Criminals and their government equals could do what they wanted with liberty, and it became an enclave or global village of outlaws. At the same time, as a black spot, Chechnya demonstrated the potential to challenge state sovereignty by breaking down the legal system. Dudayev's ascent to power turned Chechnya into an "almost state" in that the republic managed to gain *de jure* independence with little to no international recognition, and with areas of black spots that he could not control.⁵⁹

This was not more evident than when clashes between the Sufi and Sunni Chechens and the Sunni Ingush began throughout the Republic. As Mikhail Gorbachev had prophesied at the dissolution of the USSR, nationality problems, and the fight for territory would be a major problem for the newly created republics. The situation in the North Caucasus were a good example of this. In neighboring Dagestan, an Islamic/nationalist/separatist fight broke out between quarreling Muslim groups. This spilled over into Chechnya as Chechens and Ingush disagreed and fought over nationalistic land claims. In one instance, on 26 May 1992 in the heavily Ingush Malgobeksiia *raion*, Ingush nationals killed two Chechens, a Kattoev and the other Yenianov, who was the chairman of the local *kolkhoz*. After that, a group of Chechens swore a blood feud for their dead compatriots, and in a shootout they killed numerous Ingush, and disarmed the rest.⁶⁰

As things spiraled out of control, Yeltsin and Dudayev's relationship grew icy. Moscow quickly backed Umar Avturkhanov, a rich merchant and mayor of the north-western,

Cossack dominated Nadterechnyi district. Through him, Moscow pursued a policy of proxy war, and Avturkhanov created the anti-government movement "March." He was also a member of the five-clan, anti-Dudayev party and movement "Round Table," taking part in the May and June 1993 organized opposition protests against the regime in Grozny. Earlier in the spring of 1993, Dudayev had dissolved the Chechen Parliament claiming it was superfluous, and he thereafter lost the support and man power of men like Gantemirov and Labazanovas well.⁶¹

By 1994, Avturkhanov had bragged that Yeltsin had supplied him with over forty billion rubles in cash, and a fleet of seventy tanks and combat gunships with crews. He went on to create the opposition "Provisional Council," an uneasy alliance with 5 Chechen crime lords, basing it in the north-west where he publicly accused Dudayev's regime of turning Chechnya into a major crime base, and bringing the region to the brink of economic disaster. He stated that the republic was overwhelmingly in his favor, and that he did not want to use violence to overthrow Dudayev, but if Dudayev used violence then the response would be adequate. The Chechen government labeled Avturkhanov a state traitor in cahoots with the Kremlin and a man who was trying to "stir up a fratricidal war in the North Caucasus."⁶²

True to their prediction, in June 1994 violence broke out between the Chechen government and a number of clan-based opposition factions. The opposition had 4 distinct factions. The main center of opposition laid with Avturkhanov and he was backed by the Terk-hu clan, a group made up of many ex-communist government officials, and Moscow's main supporter. The second main group centered in the Shali and Veden districts under the charismatic criminal Labazanov. He then founded the *Niiso* (Justice) Party, later to be aided by Khoza Suleimanov. Beslan Gantemirov headed the third group based in the village of Gekhi in the south west of the Republic. Lastly, after his release from a Russian prison, President Yeltsin's former opponent and Chechen politician Ruslan Khasbulatov gathered a force outside of Tolstoi-Yurt, about 10 miles north of Grozny.⁶³ This was exactly what Moscow had wanted. Per their plan, the center had used Chechnya's long history of a clan-based society to gain real opposition to Dudayev and his cronies, while supporting all four factions with money and supplies. By the summer of 1994, Chechnya had broken out into a civil war that was very reminiscent of the turf war that was being fought between criminal factions at the same time in Moscow.⁶⁴

According to the most notable Chechen chronicler of the time, Timur Muzaev, on 12 June, supporters of Labazanov gathered in Sheikh Mansur Square in the middle of Grozny demanding Dudayev step down. The next day, the Chechen Department of Security attacked his house and headquarters on the outskirts of the capital. His wife and one of his brothers were killed in the crossfire, and that day Labazanov proclaimed a blood feud against Dudayev. In the free for all, an estimated 180 to 300 people were brought down by machine guns and automatic weapons. Labazanov had to retreat to Argun, and soon all four factions joined together to create the "Provisional Council," headed by the Moscow-supported Avturkhanov.⁶⁵

Intermittent fighting occurred through the rest of the summer and at the beginning of September, despite Moscow's "unofficial" generous support of ten armored personnel carriers and six attack helicopters and crews, Labazanov's forces were once again routed in Argun.⁶⁶ At the end of the month, in the government-held village of Kalinovskaia, helicopters allegedly owned by the opposition shelled an airport and aviation training center called "North." On 13 October Dudayev's forces attacked Gehi, an opposition-held village. Two days later, in response, the opposition attacked Grozny with Gantemirov coming from the south and Avturkhanov and Labazanov coming from the north. After a day of heavy fighting, the opposition was pushed out and Dudayev remained in control of the capital. According to the Russian General Staff, at the beginning of November the opposition was given another forty tanks and extensive training on how to operate them to attempt another taking of Grozny.⁶⁷

At dawn on 26 November 1994, armed detachments of the pro-Moscow Chechen opposition, with Russian tanks from the Kantemirovskaya and Taman divisions, and supported by Russian air power, entered the city of Grozny from three sides. The forces consisted of about four-thousand militia and about one-hundred units of various armored vehicles, the crews of which were reportedly manned by men from the FSK (soon to be the FSB, Federal Security Bureau). The fierce battle lasted all day, the rebels were completely defeated, and driven out of the city. An estimated twenty tanks, eighteen infantry fighting vehicles, and twenty-three armored personnel carriers were destroyed by Dudayev's fighters. According to various approximations, there were an estimated 300 to 450 rebels and 70 Russian mercenaries killed. From 150 to 200 members of the armed invasion were taken as prisoners, among whom there were 35 officers of the Taman and Kantemirovskaya divisions,

as well as about 30 soldiers and staff of the FSK. This was the unofficial beginning of an opened-arm invasion of the Republic by the Russian military, and was declared by Dudayev as the “Day of Armed Forces of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria.”⁶⁸

Dalkhan Khozhayev, a well-known journalist and pamphleteer turned Chechen Field Commander, was appointed the Chief of Akhmad Zakayev's HQ in the South-West. Zakayev was the Minister of Culture at the time, and a staunch Dudayev backer. In an interview, Khozhayev explains the utter chaos that reigned that day. Tanks were on fire all over the city, rapid gunfire could be heard throughout, and there were wounded and dead Russians and Chechens in the streets. By the early evening lines of Russian POW's who had surrendered to warlord Shamil Basayev (discussed later) could be seen being taken to Kirov Park. But, according to Khozhayev, around a railway station and the State Security building fighting was still fierce as the author admitted the most daring and nefarious of the men they fought that day were Chechens on the other side. At 4 pm, as the fighting continued near the State Security building, reinforcements for the government troops rolled in from the outer villages and the opposition forces retreated out of the capital. As he explained it:

"The whole day had a bizarre quality - imagine people walking quietly in streets littered with burning tanks!...After 26 November, everybody knew that war would come. Many people began arming themselves. With groups of friends, we armed a unit. The threat united many people and the opposition lost many of its partisans. Many men had joined the opposition on the promise of money incentives. When they realized that Russia was going to invade, they joined our ranks."⁶⁹

Despite overwhelming odds, Dudayev's forces had won the first Battle of Grozny. It did prove however that was he not in complete control of the republic, and that Russia was willing to fight to root out lawlessness and keep it a part of the Russian Federation. Even though Dudayev helped fill the political vacuum left from the dissolution of the Union, he never had the monopoly of force that it takes for a government to ensure the security of its citizens. Thus mass organized crime overran Chechnya and the republic was controlled almost entirely by rival gangs/clans with the government at the top of the food chain. His ascent to power was not a grass roots movement, but it was venal and criminal, which then turned religious and nationalistic. Much like Chechen society, the government was based on an intricate social structure of a *teip* or clan, which meant that all paths to power and wealth

ran through his own family or hand-picked officials, men who formed the core of the Chechen *bratva*. Under Dudayev, Chechnya had become the first post-Soviet mafia controlled state.⁷⁰

Precursor to the Invasion

An early 1995 commission by the Russian duma (parliament), headed by Stanislav Govorukhin, was tasked with writing a report on the social issues within Chechnya before the start of the war. It became filled with localized, and horrendous, occurrences of crimes committed by regular citizens. The report discussed young girls being stolen at the bazaar, and assaulted in stalls at the same market. Young boys being beaten to death for no apparent reason, hanging from trees with their eyes poked out many of whom could not be identified by their parents or relatives. Kidnapping for ransom, a time-honored *abrek* tradition that had only been stopped during the Soviet period, came back with full force. However, before the First Chechen War in late 1994, kidnappings became not just for ransom, but what arose was the trade of kidnapping young girls and women for brothels, harems, and pornography. In Grozny in 1994, there were more than ten occasions of abduction and compulsion of young female students attending one mathematics and physics school. Two of the girls' corpses were later found in the Sunzha River the other eight were never found.⁷¹

The commission, however, did not leave Dudayev out of the equation altogether. It argued that there was no avoiding the terror and wrath that was brought on by the president and his followers. In 1993-1994, fifty-eight opposition leaders were killed after they were elected to parliament. In 1994, in the town of Urus-Martan alone, 210 Chechen public figures were killed because they had voiced their misgivings about the president.⁷²

Because of the situation, by mid-1994 the rumblings of a Russian invasion were beginning to be heard, and the anti-Dudayev group was growing. The republic was in a state of civil war as Labazanov, Gantemirov, Khasbulatov, and other strongmen had tried to use violence to overthrow the president. But Dudayev had prevailed, the blame game began, and war was on the horizon. Norwegian political scientist and Chechen War observer Pavel Baev argued there were a couple important factors to the beginning of the war. One particular destabilizer was the enormous amounts of weaponry that the Soviet Army left in the republic. Not only did the new Russian Army not have the infrastructure to move much of their materiel scattered throughout the old union, but Chechen paramilitary formations had made it

hard by raiding and blockading military bases and depots. There was also a struggle for power to control oil production, the arms-trafficking, and drug markets, which came to fruition in the all-out civil war the year earlier. What had also emerged was a group of corrupt officials and criminal gangs that had made the political situation complicated all the way to the top. As he argued, “it is unquestionable that the main driving forces for the Chechen crisis were internal, and one of the key factors was the irresponsible leadership.”⁷³

More to the point, Canadian political scientist Aurelie Campana argued that it was Dudayev who had neither the will nor the way to control the crime and violence. It was him who failed to regulate the circulation of weapons in the republic, and even though he had secured some of the Soviet cache, most of it had fallen into the hands of criminals and armed paramilitary groups that began to proliferate once Chechnya became a Dudayev-made “economic free zone.” The problem for the president was that once this occurred he had no way of absolutely ridding the republic of the warlords, and showed no political will to fight the criminalization of his “failed state.” While in power there were basically no decrees concerning social matters such as education, health care, pensions, and payments of arrears of salary, but reforms dealing with economic affairs (the creation of the free zone) and military preparations were given high priority. Although he did emphasize the powers of his “National Guard,” his policy of the possession of weapons by any regular citizen encouraged a violence that the government could not control. On the other hand, Dudayev argued all Chechens should be armed because since his election a Russian invasion was inevitable, and “Chechens know the price of freedom.”⁷⁴

The Russian Procurator’s Office agreed with that assessment. In late 1994, they brought a case against Dudayev’s “criminal, anti-peace movement.” They also attacked other illegal, armed criminal groups in the territory and made provisions stating that they were also responsible for *banditizm* and terrorism. In 1993, on the Grozny line of the Northern-Caucasus train route, 559 train cars were robbed, as well as near 4,000 wagons and containers for the sum of at least 11.5 billion rubles. Likewise, in the first half of 1994, there were 450 attacks or robberies on train cars, and theft from wagons and containers equaled 7 billion rubles. In the fall of 1993, a Chechen criminal group fled into Turkey, and came back into the republic with over 10 billion false rubles. And according to procurators office, “the regime of the time simply chose to ignore it.”⁷⁵

When the invasion of Chechnya came to fruition in December 1994, the former chairman of the State Committee of the RSFSR on nationalities, Valery A Tishkov, argued that the reason for the war was the rise in criminality due to Dudayev's lack of policing. However, there were some examples of Russian special services getting in on the action. On 26 January 1993, employees of the police complex Ismailovo together with OMON (Russian special police unit) agents organized a criminal group with eleven members and began a false ruble operation, also known as an Aviso scam. In this well-known scam for which Chechen would become notorious, someone would write a false check to a federal bank and an employee on the inside would cash the check, give the person who made the deposit the money up front, and later send the check back to the Federal Reserve where it would turn up to be useless. In this particular instance, it was done through the commercial bank "Business Russia." The group cashed in on 384 million rubles and then headed to the city of Malgobek where they were eventually caught by the MVD unit tasked with economic crimes. A month later, the MVD also caught two Chechens in the city of Ufa with more than 487 million rubles on their person. Although these culprits were arrested, billions of rubles were lost this way in the republic never to be found.⁷⁶

To Tishkov though, what was equally important was the catastrophic drop in industrial and agricultural output during Dudayev's reign. From the years 1992-1994, the State Committee summarized that industrial production in Chechnya and Ingushetia dropped sixty-one percent from its 1991 totals. Likewise, agricultural production to feed its citizens dropped almost fifty percent, as compared to eighteen percent for the whole Russian Federation. The government could not employ or feed its citizens. He wrote:

"It is no secret that the Dudayev regime has practically stopped all economic and agricultural output in Chechnya. It has helped develop the expansion of criminal groups on the territory and all of Russia, encouraged by the present administration that practically single-handedly brought it upon us. It is a parasitic-predatory, thieving conglomerate lowering the people's level of living exponentially."⁷⁷

However, there are some who claim that the amount of fraud and criminal doings attributed to the Dudayev regime was just too staggering to be true. Russian historian and political scientist S.E Kurginian argued that much of what happened in Chechnya was due to the political situation, but at the same time it would be impossible to be accused of forging 4 trillion rubles and not get caught in the act at least once. It was also not possible for that

much oil and petroleum products to vanish, and that the Russian press and security services vilified the Chechens, especially Dudayev, because it was easy and formulaic. There was no question that things were bad there, but it was quite possible that many journalists and committees came out with reports that were inexact and verified by unknown “experts.” Perhaps Dudayev had created a sort of “Pirate’s Kingdom,” but much of the information disseminated was “made up about the wolves and the lambs.”⁷⁸

Russian financial expert Lev Makaryevich went even further. He wrote in *Financovie Izvestia* (Financial News) that perhaps the Russians should take the blame. They could have bought back the war materiel that was left in Chechnya for billions of rubles, supplied the republic with the means to create a certifiable infrastructure, and recognized the republic in some capacity to give the government a legitimate chance of working. Instead, the Russians allowed the republic to become one of the most barren, criminal-infested regions of the entire Federation because “the Russian bankers and politicians were making millions off of fake cash, drugs, and guns.”⁷⁹

Agence France-Presse journalist Sebastian Smith, who was in Chechnya during this time, talked about the war as a “joint venture” between the super-rich *biznesmen* who ran the republic, and the Russian politicians who had backed Dudayev from the beginning. He argued that justifying the war by calling Chechnya the “first real criminal” state ignored the reality that the Russian state was reaping the benefits of a criminalized republic. Chechens were allowed to run through Yeltsin’s blockade at will, and it became little more than a “human cash till” that anyone could go through for a price. All the blockade managed to do was criminalize all trade, and cut out the legitimate businessmen. Trains were being robbed at a Wild-West pace; the Sheik-Mansur Airport had 150 unsanctioned flights a month to destinations like Hong Kong and the Arab Emirates bringing back Turkish woodwork and leather, French perfumes, and western sportswear, especially track suits; clothing that the tough-looking men guarding the airport and selling guns at the Grozny bazaar liked to wear. Most of what was happening could have been curtailed by Russia, but they insisted on letting it go as the line between Russian officials turning a blind eye and actively participating with the criminal regime was blurred on almost every front. This was true because, Smith argued, “as any Moscow businessman paying protection to the mafia knows, being left in peace costs

money. So it seems likely that Chechnya was left free to rob and swindle, while Russia collected its cut.”⁸⁰

In reality, it was possible that both assumptions could have merit: the Chechen state was racked with criminalization, and it was easy for journalists and politicians to paint all Chechens as criminals because they were influential in the criminal world throughout the Russian Federation. President Yeltsin received hundreds of letters from citizens, as well as local and regional leaders, pleading for help to fight the ongoing struggle against crime. There were letters from Atamans (heads) of Cossack *stanitsas* (a host, or cluster of Cossack families in a certain territory) discussing violence geared towards them because of their ethnicity; letters signed by as many as 200 Chechens, Ingush, and Russians of outlying villages pleading for protection from automobile theft, vandalism, overt violence, and house invasions. Even Russian military leaders stationed in the republic wrote to Yeltsin asking for help. In late February 1994, General-Major Ivan Sokolov, the leader of the regional training center in the Sunzha *raion* on the Terek River west of Grozny, wrote down a list of crimes that had been committed that month that he was not capable of stopping. One involved a pensioner by the name of Kovalchuk whose house was invaded around ten at night. The man was killed by repeated blows to the head, a sum of 150,000 rubles was taken, along two vouchers for food. Although that was only one event he described, the General-Major admitted that many crimes like this were occurring and the likelihood of finding the culprits was quite small.⁸¹

The Ataman of the Kizlyar okryg wrote a letter to Yeltsin about the criminal situation in his territory. Homes were being broken into and people were getting killed for their possessions, pensions were not showing up, there were firefights in the squares of smaller villages, and livestock was being driven off. The Ataman likened it to the wild age of the region before the Russians came in and pacified the population. In one case, a man was shot in his home and his car was stolen. The culprit was found in the Terek oblast with the car, a swath of illegal weapons, and injuries to his head and legs from the apparent fight that took place in the house. In total, there were eleven killings in that one *stanitsa* alone, including one World War II veteran and a member of the community's government.⁸²

Outside of ethnic republics there was a large amount of vitriol and backlash against criminals who were not Russian. It had become easy to fault ethnic minorities with much of

the problems that the new Russia had starting from scratch in becoming a democratic, capitalistic nation. Nevertheless, there was much crime committed by ethnic minorities, especially Chechens, in Russian cities allowing the Russian press and government to easily throw blame their way. According to the Russian Procurators Office, in Moscow alone in 1994, the Chechen *bratva* was accused of 1,292 criminal wrongdoings that were attributed to at least 116 people. The crimes included murder, stealing, robbing attacks, extortion, theft, *krysha* (“roof”), and carrying illegal weaponry.⁸³

Right before the war, Dudayev was portrayed as a dangerous lunatic in the Russian media. *The Guardian* journalist Suzanne Goldenberg argued there was most certainly a “particular contempt for the Chechens.” They were depicted in the media as a nation of clannish, thuggish, criminals that relied on strong-arm tactics to make a name for themselves in the underworld of Moscow. The Russian press accused them of being drug dealers, running prostitution rings, being arms merchants, and smugglers. There is no question they were excellent *biznesmen*, but the mentality that every Chechen was a criminal, and that almost all of the crime in the Russian Federation was due to Chechens, was overblown. At the same time, as the rumblings of a war were coming, Dudayev himself would proclaim that the Chechen people would not back down: “We Chechens are proud and brave and cannot tolerate when someone keeps us as a slave. Of course, we are hot-tempered, but not when someone treats us kindly.”⁸⁴

By the end of 1994, the Russian government was outwardly able to not only show that the Chechen Republic was mired in criminality, but that they also played a large role in organized crime in Russia-proper. Because of this Yeltsin made a 1 December decree, stating:

“To restore peace to the Chechen Republic and to stabilize the North Caucasus from the criminals who are against peace, and to make sure that the criminals who are responsible for going against humanitarian ideals are caught, I make the following recommendation: In order that more criminals are not attracted to the area and do not become associated with heavy criminals who are against peace and the good of the citizenry, they have until 15 December to turn themselves in or they will be tried by the Procurators Office under Statue 6 of the Criminal Code.”⁸⁵

Eight days later, Yeltsin reiterated his stance that not only were the Chechens forming numerous illegal armed bands, but that these bands were linked to nationalist and religious leaders. He added that under Statue 80 of the RSRSR, the Russian Federation would fight

said criminals and groups for the safety of its citizens.⁸⁶ The same day, Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin declared that in response to this fight against criminality and illegally-formed armed bands, the Russian Federation would be sending out airplanes, tanks, artillery, and heavy weaponry in order to keep the peace and to protect the citizens.⁸⁷

Two days after the decrees, on 11 December, the Russians invaded the Chechen Republic to liberate Grozny “one district at a time, and to disarm the illegal armed groupings.” Many in the Russian military believed that the war to oust Dudayev would take only a few months because of superior firepower and numbers, but Dudayev supporters and enemies alike vowed to resist the Russians and a brutal, guerrilla war began.⁸⁸

*“Two Chechnyas”*⁸⁹

There are many good Western, Russian, and Chechen works that comprehensively cover the war so an in-depth study will not be done here.⁹⁰ But it should be noted that the war was brutal. When the Khasavoyurt Peace Accords were signed after two years of war, declaring a ceasefire, the city of Grozny was reduced to rubble and compared to Stalingrad after the famous World War Two battle. Most public buildings were not standing, human rights violations were acknowledged from both sides, and the casualties were high. Two months into the invasion and bombardment, 27,000 citizens had been killed, of them an estimated 4,000 were children and 12,000 women. Eighty-thousand people were homeless, and another 22,000 were wounded and invalided. An estimated 80,000 buildings had already been damaged, including 20,000 homes.⁹¹ Six months into the war, 36,000 civilians were dead, and only 15,000 of those were not women and children. According to one of Dudayev’s early advisors, and later leader of the militant political organization Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, Yusup Soslambekov, this type of violence showed that the war for Chechnya’s freedom was a Russian versus Chechen war. It was a political game played by the Russian government because of the hatred they had for the Chechens as a people.⁹²

The exact numbers are hard to come by as the Russian MVD does not give such statistics willingly, but Human Rights Watch and the Global Security Organization put the total amount of civilians killed during the war at near eighty-thousand. Almost half of the 1.2 million people in the republic were displaced many of whom were ethnic Russians bombed by

their own military. The Russian military had over 5,000 dead, and 17,000 wounded.

Likewise, the Chechen numbers are not easy to find either, but officially Russian services put the number at around eighteen-thousand fighters dead or missing.⁹³

The war has been described as a “Fault-Line War,” in that it involved clans, tribes, ethnicities, religious communities, and separate nations. Though it was not a typical religious war, most fault-line wars are between two different religions, and in this case Russian Orthodox Christianity and Islam were at play. They tend to be overly violent because fundamental issues of identity are at stake, and each side in the local war has an incentive to emphasize its own civilization over the one that they are fighting. They are also particular in that they are usually fought by side A and side B, until someone does something and then sides C, D, and E start to fight as well. As will be seen, this is exactly what happens in Chechnya and in many cases it was hard to identify who was fighting whom. Fault-line wars see a fierce dehumanization and demonization of opponents, which made it no surprise that after a couple of months into the war, Yeltsin proclaimed, “Mad dogs must be shot...these ill-bred people have to be shot...and we will shoot them.”⁹⁴

This was reiterated by the Russian National Union, a splinter group of the nationalist, neo-Nazi political party *Pamyat* who identified itself as the “People’s National-Patriotic Orthodox Christian” movement. Two weeks after the invasion, the Union came out with a statement vilifying Dudayev’s “Mafioso-criminal regime” claiming it was inevitable that a war was going to come. They argued that he had used his power to gain criminal control and he was a ruthless suppressor of any opposition. In many ways, much of what they said was true, but formulaic. What separated the party platform from other arguments from before the war was what they added. It goes on, “Historically speaking, the only time Chechnya was not violent and was strong was under Russian control and stability. But the arming of the community, and the subsequent fighting is for the kicking out of Russians by the Chechen criminals and their demographic expansion.”⁹⁵

It did not take long after the war started for the clan, criminal stereotype to come the forefront as the Chechens were portrayed as a Caucasian version of the Sicilian Mafioso. What the society also offered the Russian government was a chance, or so they thought, of ending the war soon. The authorities thought they could pit clans against each other. For example, the mountains versus the plains, *teips* like the Benoi versus the Yalkhoroi, the

Greater versus the Lesser, Chechens versus Ingush, and even loud *zikrists* versus silent ones. Yeltsin went as far to make Dudayev's *teip* and Naqshbandi foe, Deni Arsanov, the military governor of Chechnya. As they had done as early as the 16th century, the Russian government also used Cossacks as military allies. This was made easy because many Cossack *stanitsas* in the North Caucasus had earlier written to Yeltsin asking for help. Showing that the war was a mixture of criminality and ethnic hostility, the War Minister in the Moscow-based Union of Russian Cossacks, Vladimir Naumov proclaimed:

“Even at the end of the 20th century there is a need to use military force with regard for a people who have for decades been living under laws which reject national laws...For years these people robbed, stole cattle, killed, and looted. And all this has been regarded as the highest level of work available.”⁹⁶

Playing on clan lines, Yeltsin also anointed Doku Zavgayev as the Head of the Chechen state. Zavgayev was the Communist leader of Chechnya in 1991, and publicly backed the failed *putsch* against Gorbachev. He escaped Chechnya in 1991 after Dudayev raided the parliament building, and from then on became one of Yeltsin's top Chechen supporters. The procurator's office put him at the head of a commission to try and weed out criminality, and to eliminate the “illegal bands.”⁹⁷ This appointment was of interest to Chechens because according to Chechen politician and militant leader, Yusup Soslambekov, Zavgayev was the leader of one of the most corrupt parties in the Soviet Union. When Zavgayev left the republic running with a considerable personal fortune, the Chechen ASSR's unemployment rate was almost at eighty percent. The reality, according to Soslambekov, was that the ultimate outcome of the private greed of the former leader was the complete criminalization of the people. Zavgayev, “literally stole and raped and suppressed to gain control of the republic. But this was par for the course because the whole Soviet structure was built like a mafia with the party, their war boards, financial sectors, and so on.”⁹⁸

A 1995 report also came out showing that from 1991-1994, there were over 2,000 murders in the republic more than any other republic in the federation. In February 1995, the Moscow press published an open letter of 50,000 Russians living in the Naysrkovo and Shelkovkovo *raions*, as well as Stavropol *krai* about the criminal situation. They had lived in fear for the last 3 years claiming that Russians were “robbed, murdered, humiliated, violently raped, and no one did anything about it.” It then goes on to list all of the offenses that had been committed, including the murder by knife of a 72-year old babushka A Podkyuiko, and

the abduction of the head of the Terek *sovkhos* for the ransom of 50 million rubles. The list goes on and on, and ends with “return the Stavropol *krai* to us!” Likewise, narcotic rings, especially dealing with opium and heroin from the Golden Triangle (Myanmar, Laos and Thailand) and the Golden Crescent (Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan), were going right through Chechnya into Western Europe, the Balkans, and north into all of Russia. A large stash of opium was found in January 1995 in the Shaliskom *raion*, and later in July a firefight took place in the Tarkinskoy ravine in Dagestan between forty Russian border guards and twelve opium and hemp dealers connected to the Chechen *bratva*.⁹⁹

This brought up an important question for the Russians: how much was the Chechen *mafiya* helping Dudayev’s war effort? Chechen criminal mastermind, Nikolay “Khoza” Suleimanov, described what he called “Two Chechnyas.” This is the idea that there was the insular Chechnya fighting a war against the Russians, but there was also the Chechen *obshchiina* outside of the republic that was not, and very little help was given from the outside to the inside. Meanwhile, Moscow claimed that the regime was connected to and using money and materiel coming from the *mafiya* and its diaspora throughout the federation. In 1996, Interior Minister Anatoly Kulikov claimed that teams of Chechen gangsters were dispatched across Russia, planning on “the complete destabilization of Russia.” Suleimanov did admit that there were deals being struck, and personnel moving from one world to the other. However, he also said that these relations were pragmatic, and he and his counterparts were not keen on helping too much. In part this was for fear of reparations by the authorities, but there was also a genuine widening cultural divide between those in Russia, and those in Chechnya-proper. A good example of this was in the northern town of Petrozavodsk in 1995, a Dudayev emissary met with the *bratva* godfathers looking to see if they would help bankroll the war. Not only did they refuse, but they met later in Moscow and decided to ban transfers of money, men or weapons to the rebels.¹⁰⁰

Much of the government and the populace’s consternation for the Chechens and organized crime in general, was due to a series of bombings in Russia after the war had started. In June, car bombs had been detonated in Moscow for the first time in its history, and the usually stoic Muscovites were outraged and called for the government to stop the “crime war.” Oligarch Boris Berezovsky, who will show up in Chechnya later and be a main negotiator for the many kidnappings, had his limousine blown up. He escaped with minor

damages, but the driver was decapitated, and the nearby building's windows and fruit stands were all damaged. A few days later, a thunderous bomb ripped through a residential housing complex in Shakhty, near Rostov-on-Don, and a suspect was found with dynamite, detonators, and a large stash of American dollars. There was also a bombing at the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall, and a car bomb exploded killing an eight-year old boy. This was bad for Chechens and all organized criminals as immediately Yeltsin signed a tough new crime bill that made it easier and quicker to prosecute organized crime members. Before the bombings, there was a feeling in the capital that mobsters could operate freely without recourse as there were daily occurrences of criminals openly demanding payments from owners of kiosks, board members of large industrial enterprises, and anyone in between. Aleksandr Mikhailov of the MVD said of the gangsters, "The situation is very serious. They attack when they want to. It no longer even matters to them how many people are around when they do it."¹⁰¹

The blasts were quickly blamed on Chechen "terrorists" in collusion with the Chechen *bratva* who reportedly wanted to create fear and to get the Russians out of Chechnya. But there was no evidence of this, and many of the gangs were against the war and Dudayev from the start. Even the head of the Moscow Regional Department for Combating Organized Crime, Mikael Suntsov, told reporters that, "there is no information that any Moscow-based Chechen gangs are preparing terrorist acts in the capital." One anonymous Chechen gangster even wrote an open letter that was published in *Argumenty i Fakty*, that the Chechen gangs had nothing to do with the bombings, and that the Moscow police should join forces with them to root out the terrorists. When asked whether Dudayev could have planted the bombs, "Timur" a mid-level Chechen member argued:

"It is out of the question. The conflict has forced the Chechen Mafia to keep a low profile. And our rivals, the Georgians, Dagestanis, Azerbaijanis, and the Russians, all are taking advantage of the situation to nibble away our territory. If this state of affairs continues, the Chechen Mafia will take action to bring peace in Chechnya. Forget about planting bombs in Moscow."¹⁰²

It became clear that whether this was the case the authorities in Moscow, perhaps with the help of rival gangs, went after the Chechens. The power of the Chechen *bratva* went down during the war, but how much was not known. Likewise, there is no question that some funds and materiel were being funneled into Chechnya to fight the Russians, but this too was

unknown. Chechen chronicler Anatol Lieven argued that there must have been an enormous amount of money being sent to the republic because without it the Dudayev regime could not have kept in the fight. However, not only was it impossible to know how much because most of it was done illegally, but also because the Chechens would never admit it to doing it in the first place. The society was nearly impenetrable to non-Chechens, and as one anonymous leader discussed in an interview with Lieven, “We Chechens know how to keep secrets, and don’t discuss things with outsiders, we are one. We are disciplined.”¹⁰³

That some of the Chechen *bratva* fought against Dudayev was obvious. It was clear that mobster-politicians Ruslan Labazanov and Beslan Gantemirov fought Dudayev in 1993, and once the war began, it became apparent that they would ally with the Russians to overthrow him. Soslambekov, who would later be shot in the head at point-blank range outside of his Moscow apartment, said he saw with his own eyes family members of Chechen warlords Abul Bygaev, Isa Aleriov, General Vakha Ibragimov, and many others, meet after the start of the war in Urus-Martan to discuss an anti-Dudayev arrangement. The financing, information, political propaganda, and arming of the group would be guaranteed by Premier Sergei Shakhrai and Yeltsin’s chief administrator, Sergei Filatov. Likewise, from Moscow, Labazanov and Gantermirov were allegedly supplying millions of ill-begotten dollars to the opposition to buy guns, and to recruit specialists and officers from the Russian Army to be trainers and mercenaries. In the fall of 1994, Labazanov had maintained that the mission of Dudayev was to organize provocation, sabotage, and to find other ways to frighten ordinary Chechen people. But, Soslambekov argues, the reason why Labazanov made up these “lies” was because Dudayev kicked him out of his inner-circle, and that after he got to Moscow the criminal began working for the FSB (The Federal Security Service, the main successor to the KGB).¹⁰⁴

The War

The typical Chechen fighter, according to Russian newspaper *Izvestiya*, was twenty-five, wore a leather black jacket and blue jeans, and carried a Kalashnikov, which was either from old Soviet stock or arrived in the republic illegally. When he was not fighting, he would fly to Iraq and buy clothes, kitchen appliances, television stands, and other western goods. Thus, his main “military profession” was as a mid-level wholesale trader bringing in some

type of revenue for his specified group. Dudayev was irrelevant to him, but what was not irrelevant were his business, his wife and children, and his house; all things “he is ready to defend by force of arms.”¹⁰⁵

What was also not irrelevant was that the Chechen people were worried about the situation in their republic. One measure of that was how they felt about the idea of “blood revenge.” Although the Soviets did not completely eradicate *adat* and other traditions, the use of eye-for-an-eye justice had gone down during their rule. In 1990, only thirty-percent of the people in the mountains and plains looked upon the tradition favorably, while in the cities it was closer to twenty percent. However, in 1992, it went up to almost eighty-percent in the mountains and plains, and a little over seventy in the cities. By the beginning of the war, it remained around eighty percent in the mountains, but it jumped to eighty-five percent in the plains, and almost ninety-percent in the city. This, according to Russian sociologist Zalpa Bersanov, was entirely because of the lawlessness that had enveloped the country.¹⁰⁶

Two weeks into the war, President Dudayev emptied the central Grozny prison of any criminals who vowed to fight the Russians as some estimates put the number as high as six hundred. The press secretary of the Russian counterespionage office did not specify numbers, but he did acknowledge that they were put under the head of one Vasily Nesterenko, a citizen of Ukraine. There was not, and still is not, much known about the man besides he was a regular inmate throughout North Caucasian prisons, he vowed to fight for Dudayev to the death, and he was the president’s emissary and recruiter of Slavic ethnicities within the prison.¹⁰⁷

Nesterenko was the head of the many numbered *bandformirovanniyakh*¹⁰⁸ fighting for Dudayev. Most of these “band formations” were made up of recently released or convicted prisoners whose exact numbers were not known, but observers put them in the thousands. It is interesting to note though, that at the beginning of the first war foreigners from Afghanistan, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Moldavia, and the Baltic countries were allegedly fighting for Dudayev. These “sons of luck,” as they were called by the Russian press, were suspected of fighting for a few dollars and accused of descending the republic even further into *banditizm*, surrounding themselves with death and sorrow, and trying to make Chechnya a “subject of Allah.”¹⁰⁹ The Russians found and detained numerous fighters of this type. At the end of January, the Russian army found and detained one Nur

Mohammad from Afghanistan. He had fought against the Soviets in the Afghanistan War, and was later connected to Hezbollah in Lebanon. He spoke fairly good Russian, and was tracked down in Chechnya as he was wanted for war crimes on the territory of the Russian Federation.¹¹⁰ It was not just foreign men or Muslims who were enrolling to fight the Russians; the 81st Russian Motor Infantry Division was slowed down in Grozny by a single sniper, and the shooter turned out to be a woman from Belarus.¹¹¹

Although Islamic fighters began coming into the republic, one of the main reasons the Russians were fighting the war was to stamp out criminality. In January 1995, a month in, the Russian Secretary of Safety, Oleg Lobov, blamed much of the death on the “illegal and criminal” groups that were using any type of tactics to fight the war. Lobov accused the bands, who followed the commands of their *teip* elders or religious leaders, of shooting civilians, women, children, and the old. This type of criminal warfare was going to make it impossible for the Russians to negotiate during the fighting.¹¹² A week later, when asked about the possibility of negotiating terms with Dudayev, Prime Minister and former head of the Russian gas company *Gazprom* Viktor Chernomyrdin replied, “With *banditz* we do not negotiate.”¹¹³

Russian Air Commander Vitaly Pavlov realized quickly that the tactics of the *banditz* were quite simple. When they would be met with fire from the air, the men would run to the nearest schoolhouse or block of homes that were inhabited by ethnic Russians, and they knew very well where Russians lived. Later, when Pavlov’s unit was clearing the “criminal zone” at the Grozny Airport, they got into a troubling situation with the *banditz*. While in the airport, the Russian forces were surrounded and were being hammered by anti-aircraft guns and mortar, all of which were of Soviet origin. After that, there arrived almost 30 more *banditz* without uniforms and driving Mercedes-Benzes (the car of choice for the Chechen underworld). Most of Pavlov’s men escaped the shootout, but it was plain to see that they were not fighting a regular army.¹¹⁴

For those who were intrepid enough, the war had created even more opportunity for criminal gains. According to the Russians, in the first six months of 1995, over two trillion rubles were pumped into the republic’s budget, but even government supporters admitted that there was no normalization of electricity, no work done on sewers and drainage, no building of hospitals or any medical supplies for that, no schools were built, and Grozny was in

ruins.¹¹⁵ This, of course, was not the government's fault completely. Vyacheslav Murinov, a Russian soldier in the Maikop brigade, remembers walking his company into a mansion that was next door to a kindergarten in order to regroup and re-equip. What they found was beyond imagination. The whole place was carpeted (an enormous luxury not only in Chechnya but Russia as well), had consumer goods from refrigerators to a washer and dryer, handmade crafts from all over the world, expensive furniture, crystal, and china. The most impressive item though, was the large audio-video apparatus of "which we had only ever seen in advertisements... We could see for ourselves that drugs and supplying illegal arms brought in money, *and this is how the people here are brought up* (italics added)."¹¹⁶

There were a couple of places that a person living in a desolate war zone could get the money to not only buy such things, but to actually get them delivered. The first was the "Abkhaz Route." This was the route that had begun operation in 1993 by the Basayev brothers, Shamil and Shirvan. Shamil, named after the original Shamil of the Caucasian Wars, will later become known as "the Wolf of the Caucasus" and Russia's Public Enemy #1. Reportedly, the Abkhaz Route was established to help the Muslim Abkhazian rebels gain weapons, fighters, money, and training to separate from Georgia. By the mid-1990's, however, the network that was used as a smuggling route for guns and fighters was also used for smuggling drugs from the "Golden" areas to finance the war and pay soldiers. Using Mi-6 helicopters, the Basayev brothers were shipping drugs (mostly heroin) from the Vedenskii raion in Chechnya, into the Dzeyrakh Gorge in Kabardino-Balkaria. From there, Abkhaz smugglers would deliver the drugs by truck to Port Sukhumi on the Black Sea to be picked up by Turkish ships arriving in the Northern Cyprus port of Famagusta where local drug lords would take over. On the return routes, the ships, trucks, and helicopters would reportedly be carrying arms and munitions acquired by Turkish intelligence headed for Basayev's and Dudayev's forces.¹¹⁷

Another key base for the export of drugs and importation of weapons and ammunition was in the small Chechen city southeast of Grozny called Shali. According to Yossef Bodansky, the then head of the US Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Non-Conventional Warfare, the most sensitive cargoes, such as nuclear weapons, along with the *mujahedin* from across the globe were moved through this area. A special detachment of about 100 rebels, *mujahedin* and mercenaries, mainly former Soviet special service member

from Ukraine and the Baltic States, also had a base in the city. Shali was also used for storage and transshipment of weapons, arm's accessories, and ammunition acquired from a wide variety of illegal sources such as ex-Soviet military depots in Mongolia, Germany, Lithuania, and other unidentified sources. Bodansky also argued that close relations with Iranian intelligence helped the Chechens expand their criminal activities. The Chechens utilized flights between Bitlis, Turkey and Chitral, Pakistan, as well Bitlis and Nasosnaya, Azerbaijan as large sources of income to fight the war. Perhaps as bravado, or because they believed it would help unite the cause against the Russians, generals like Basayev, the extreme separatist and warlord Salman Raduyev, and the soon to be famous kidnapper Arbi Barayev, all suggested that the Chechen *mafîya* was involved one way or another in financing the war. Allegedly, one way was distributing Tehran-made counterfeit \$100 bills throughout the Russian Federation that equaled close to \$30 million.¹¹⁸

The idea of smuggling many of the unaccounted-for nuclear warheads during this period was also an issue, especially to the United States. The successful theft of a fully functioning nuclear weapon was, and is, the "Holy Grail" of nuclear smuggling. There had been attempts by groups to acquire one, and al-Qaeda had always been linked, rightly or wrongly, to the Chechen rebels in trying to acquire one. For example, in October 1995, the Russian newspaper *Zavtra* published an article claiming that the Chechen rebels had obtained two nuclear weapons. The reports were never confirmed, and the editor later retracted the statement claiming it had been fed to him by the Chechens to scare the Russian public and government. However, later on, Western, Middle Eastern, and Russian sources would claim that Osama bin Laden had a "few Soviet suitcase bombs acquired through the Chechens."¹¹⁹

A few months into the war, the fight against the *banditz* also began to encompass the new threat of terrorism. Chechen fighters like Basayev, Raduyev, and General Aslan Maskhadov (he will later be president), willingly or unwillingly, would be joined by foreign fighters, the most famous being the Jordanian known as "Khattab." Once it was clear that Russian forces were not just fighting Chechens the government began issuing warnings. If Chechens housed, concealed, or helped the *banditz* during the chaos of war the Russian forces would not hold back. A February 1995 notice from the Russian War Command Group was made available to the Chechen population warning them not to intervene in the fight or it would be an eye-for-an-eye. It cautioned, "The slow, quiet, powerful freedom of *banditz* like

Khattab, Basayev, and Raduyev, who have infiltrated your town under the chaos of war is coming to an end. The *banditz* should expect their evil deeds will be countered with force, and they should expect a maximum unpleasant ending.”¹²⁰

Four months after this, the war changed from a war against criminals to a war against criminals and terrorists. This was due to Shamil Basayev and one to two hundred of his *bandformirovanniyakh* that took over a hospital in the town of Buddyonovsk about seventy miles north of the Chechen border. The six-day siege of the hospital, which started with the rebels demand for a cessation of hostilities and a launching of peace talks with President Dudayev, ended in a catastrophic shootout. In all there were 129 civilians killed, 415 wounded, 54 public buildings and 110 houses fully or partially destroyed. But the media nightmare for the Russian government was just beginning as only 15 members of Basayev’s gang were caught and given prison sentences. Likewise, after negotiations between Prime Minister Chernomyrdin and Basayev, the *banditz* left the hospital unscathed with a group of hostages and were allowed to reach the Chechen border before they released the hostages.¹²¹

Izvestiya journalist Nikolai Gritchin was one of the thirty journalists allowed to be near the hospital to cover the situation. After some negotiation, the journalists were then allowed to enter the hospital, and were met at the doors by a commando in camouflage aiming an automatic machine gun at them. As they climbed through the hospital to get to Basayev, they “moved through a cruel structure of fear, sickness, and unlimited suffering. With silent and frightened gazes they looked at us for help, and it was not possible to look without shuddering.” They got to the second floor and there stood Basayev in camo ready to make his case. He called them the “reconnoiter-diversionary battalion,” whose task was to go back to Moscow and report to the Kremlin what they had seen. They were tasked with asking Yeltsin if he would like his capital bombed and ruined like Grozny had been. He then argued that the Russians went to war to eliminate the Chechen people who were viewed as criminals, and it proved that “we (Chechens) shoot their soldiers, they shoot our villagers,” which created a whole new generation of fighters and criminals. Proving this point, as the journalists left they passed a cheerful boy no more than fifteen years old holding an AK-47 in his hands, and many more who were probably not much older, but were wearing masks so Gritchin was not certain.¹²²

It is telling that after Basayev and his men slipped back into Chechnya, he argued that what he did was not planned, but it was a political act of desperation. It took place on the eve of a G-7 summit, and it was a massive blow to Moscow in what was already an unpopular war. Basayev's own explanation for the act is significant:

“Before I was not a supporter of that sort of action...because I knew what measures and cost it would entail...But when last year we were thrown out of Vedeno, and they had driven us into a corner with the very savage and cruel annihilation of villagers, women, children, old people, of a whole people, then [we said] ‘Let’s go to Russia...we will stop the war or we will all die.’”¹²³

Back in Grozny, the black market and the accumulation of illegal weaponry was key for the rebels, or *boyeviks* (fighters) as the Russians called them, to fighting the war. The main armaments for the Chechens had been amassed by Dudayev, but Russian military sources repeatedly talked about new supplies such as Grad rockets and RPG's being smuggled in from Azerbaijan and Turkey. Some were done by stealth, some with collusion of paid Russian border guards in Dagestan, and at least one reported air drop from Azerbaijan. But the “real scandal” was that the Russian were selling arms to the Chechens. According to journalist Sebastian Smith who was in the republic covering the war, a combination of low morale, low sense of mission, and real poverty and hunger made it inevitable. Conscripts were living on five dollars a day, and almost every checkpoint was a black market where soldiers sold their guns, ammunition, or petrol to passing cars for vodka and food. Smith saw an obviously underfed Russian conscript steal onions off the back of a truck, and in conditions like this it was not a large step to start selling the hottest commodities of all – weapons and ammunition.¹²⁴

In one case, a Russian unit sold off their Armored Personnel Carrier, or APC. According the Chechens though, and much corroborating evidence, the sale had not been an isolated incident. Tanks and APC's had legitimately been abandoned or captured in battle, but there was also a racket where Russians would simulate battles while pretending to lose their weapons and selling them to the highest bidders. One anonymous Russian officer admitted that tanks usually sold for around \$6,000, and that APC's and Grad rockets would go for a little less.¹²⁵ The Russian procurators office looked into the illegal sale of weaponry and brought up 72 criminals cases. In the hands of the *banditz* were found automatic weapons, satellite machinery, and apparatuses for radio and electronic reconnaissance, which could

have only come from the Russian Army. It was obvious much of the equipment had come right from the factory, and according to the FSB, there were at least fifteen “criminal groups” who had such equipment. It was also clear that many of the groups were fighting for Dudayev.¹²⁶

Chechnya was not a safe place. The journal *Rossiskaia Federatsiia* argued that the Republic had “become Russia’s ghetto.” Because of the war and poverty criminality was the only real work left, and the *banditz* robbed on the street and took pensions in order to give the money to young men to get them to fight. In Grozny, it was alleged that *bandformirovanniyakh* used sadistic measures to get money and create bases where they could launch their activities. They would walk the streets and goad people to surrender their money by threatening them with hot electrical irons. In Stavropol, an elderly woman arrived home to find that her whole family had been killed, including her daughters and son-in-law, most of them aged 14-16 years old. They were all shot in the forehead, and piled up in the kitchen. After three meetings with the police, they finally agreed to investigate the murders, and found that it was a group of fighters who did it to take over the house as a base of operations. As the war dragged into its second-year it was clear the sanctity of human life was going by the wayside.¹²⁷

The war was a devastating example of a struggle that was mired in crimes committed against soldiers and civilians from both sides. Both sides were accused of this, and they have been well-documented by many Russian, Chechen, and Western scholars and journalists. A few months into the war, the Russian press told stories of Chechen fighters dressed up in Russian uniforms burning children’s homes with children in them, Dudayev’s snipers taking out civilians walking down the street, soldiers picking up people walking down the street and taking them somewhere to shoot them, and so on. All of this was grotesque stuff, much of it done by who knows who. Chechnya quickly became flooded with unidentified troops and mass burial grounds of unidentified people.¹²⁸

It was also difficult to put an estimate on the proportion of national property lost during the war. The Republic’s Local Lore Museum in Grozny had what was virtually the last major collection of sabers, *shashqas* (slightly curved, lightweight sword), *kinzhals*, flintlock guns, pistols, powder flasks, belts inlaid with silver, cartridges, women’s decorations and other artistic and historical valuables in the area. The collection also included a *kinzhal*

that belonged to the celebrated *abrek* Zelimkhan of Kharachoi, a *kinzhal* that belonged to Shamil's lieutenant Khajji-Murat, a *shashqa* owned by Uma Duyev who was Shamil's comrade-in-arms and leader of the national liberation struggle in the late 19th century, and a *kinzhal* owned by the famous Chechen composer Muslim Magomayev. Magomayev's dagger, made in the early nineteenth century, was a rare work of art of a craftsmen who lived in the *aul* of Bolshiya-Ataghi where he was born. Most of the arms in the museum were decorated with gold and silver and had ivory components. Also lost were two Gurda *shashqas*, and many other arms that were yet to be studied in greater detail.¹²⁹

Banditz and Terrorists

In a 9 January 1996 effort to allegedly copy Basayev's hostage-taking at Buddyonovsk, Chechen Field Commander and President Dudayev's son-in-law, Salman Raduyev, carried out a large hostage situation in the Dagestani city of Kizlyar. The Chechen "maverick" was the leader of the "Lone Wolf" band numbering around 150 fighters who took over 2,000 people hostage in the local hospital. The Russians quickly sent in the FSB and the MVD, including the director of the FSB Mikhail Bursikov, Interior Minister Anatoly Kulikov, and around 150 crack troops. Raduyev said they would start killing people until the Russians left Chechnya, and true to his word, close to 50 hostages lost their lives the first day of the takeover in what witnesses called "all-out war." A shootout ensued, and the rebels ran from the hospital with 100 hostages towards the Chechen border. Right before freedom, they were stopped by Russian forces and holed up in a small, farming village called Pervomayskoye. From the 19th to the 28th Chechen fighters from places such as Zandak and Kyrchaloi broke through Russian lines to come help their comrades. Likewise, the Russians brought in nearly one thousand of their best troops to make sure that Buddyonovsk would not happen again.¹³⁰

While there, one of the captives said the Chechens made the hostages dig trenches all day to provide cover. However, most agreed that once they got to Pervomayskoye, the Chechens treated them fairly. "They shared everything they had with us, from the last piece of bread to all the news they received on their radio. They even had a satellite phone." One captor said that Raduyev was using that phone to talk to Iranians, Pakistanis, and his Chechen brothers. After almost ten-days of heavy artillery and air attacks, and dozens of missile barrages, the rebels broke out of the village, ambushed several freezing Russian soldiers and

crossed the bridge that was supposed to be blown up back into Chechnya.¹³¹ The numbers of deaths were hard to come by, but Raduyev's forces suffered at least fifty casualties, and the Russian forces somewhere near sixty-five, in Kizlyar thirty-four were killed, and in Pervomsayskoye thirty-one. The remaining hostages were released a couple days after Raduyev entered Chechnya, and Russia once again was on the losing end of a hostage situation.¹³²

The fiery Raduyev, known for his bravado and strong Islamic rhetoric, was then wanted for murder, terrorism, and hostage-taking. In March, he was subsequently shot in the face and pronounced dead. Russian sources said that the security services assassinated him for his role in Kizlyar while others said it was because of a blood feud. Either way, the reports were false and Raduyev showed back up in the republic a few months later with his features so changed that reporters could only recognize him because of his voice. He then gained the nickname "Titanic" because his face had been put back together with titanium implants.¹³³

The two successful raids came at a bad time for Yeltsin who was up for reelection. On 16 April, a successful raid by a group of 100 Chechens on a Russian outpost in the Yarshardi *raion* (25 miles west of Grozny) was another black eye for the president. The ambush on the Russian armored and technical group was organized and brutal, opening fire with grenade launchers and artillery wounding 100 and killing eight more. The importance of this event had many repercussions. Firstly, it gave the Russian public more devastating news about the unpopular war. Secondly, the *banditz* bombed the radio station and blew up over 400 meters of a gas line that went through the Terek region, and was only fifty kilometers from the main North-Eastern Grozny Line. In his response, Yeltsin changed the motives of the war, saying, "War like this is not a war of artillery and airplanes, but a fight with terrorists and *banditizm*."¹³⁴ No longer were they just fighting *banditz*.

Five days later, at around 8 pm, an airstrike killed President Dzhokhar Dudayev in a small gully above the southwest Chechen town of Gekhi-Chu. For the next two days there was rampant speculation about whether the attack had in fact succeeded, but Vice-President and successor Zelimkhan Yanderbiev confirmed his death on 23 April. Immediately the Russians were blamed, but they repeatedly denied any involvement in the death. He was buried in the area near where he was killed, next to his mother.¹³⁵

There were reports that Dudayev knew he was trapped so went out of the city to make sure no innocents were killed, which was a good thing as his car was hurled ten meters down the hill by the force of the blast. Immediately, his death site, a crater about four-meters wide and four-meters deep, became a place of pilgrimage and the villagers renamed their city Dzhokhar. Although many of the Chechen commanders and warlords spread throughout the republic did not always fight along each other, during the three days of mourning they all vowed revenge for Dudayev's death. Akhmed Zakayev, Dudayev's Minister of Culture and commander of the southwest front, swore revenge while dressed in camouflage fatigues and wearing a black Arab headdress and green headband. He also intimated that the new president Yanderbiev would not be negotiating with Moscow anymore after the attack, and promised that "adequate measures will be taken. Russia will weep for a long time for the death of our president."¹³⁶

A few days after the burial, an unnamed Russian Interior Ministry official acknowledged that the Russians killed Dudayev. Vice-President Yanderbiev vowed to follow constitutional law and became the new president of the nation of Ichkeria. In a village near Urus-Martan, Lieutenant Colonel Doka Makhayev, a bearded and fatigue-clad commander of Dudayev's southwestern forces, said he personally saw Dudayev's body, and described the attack as happening around 8:45 pm on that Sunday. Makhayev also claimed that after the nation was finished mourning the president, "the people will fight 1,000 times more aggressively."¹³⁷

Immediately the Russian government labeled Yanderbiev's government an illegal formation and organ of power. This was reiterated in early July when the force under him attacked Russian strongholds in Grozny in government buildings, schools, hospitals, banks, and other locations. The deaths were in the high teens, and the MVD took heavy casualties. Secretary of Security, Alexander Lebed, vowed to fight the rebellious bands and their followers. Among these "united commands," the MVD included sixty-odd groups of illegal *bandformirovanniyakh* that were building legitimacy in the republic, and communicated freely with Yanderbiev's forces using an intricate system with radios and satellite phones. As a result, according to the Russians, the city of Grozny and surrounding areas had become filled with "thieving illegal formations, looters, and profiteers who are persuading the public that they have the power."¹³⁸

The Russians were upset by the offensive because in July the two sides had signed a cease-fire while Yeltsin was getting reelected. Shamil Basayev was at the head of the raid on Grozny, and although key Chechen commanders had argued as to whether to negotiate with the Russians the raid made that superfluous. Instead, the head of the Russian State Commission on Chechnya said that Moscow would never enter talks with the rebel government, and Yanderbiev, along with his Chief-of-Staff, Aslan Maskhadov, and Basayev, were put on a list and wanted for war crimes. The fighting was intense as Russian helicopters hurled rockets and heavy machine-gun fire at the rebel positions to make sure that all steps would be taken to “drive off the raiders” before Yeltsin’s mid-July inauguration festivities. The press office of Yeltsin announced that “the combat operations imposed on the federal troops by the separatists can only be neutralized by an adequate strike.”¹³⁹

In mid-August the Russians began to shell and bomb the capital city once again. On 19 August, hardline Russian commander Lieutenant General Konstantin Pulikov issued an ultimatum for civilians to evacuate the capital or face even more devastating bombardment. It should be noted that at this time President Yeltsin was nowhere to be found because of health issues. Once the bombings commenced, Lebed reportedly had an eight-hour, late-night 22 August meeting with general Maskhadov in a small town southwest of Grozny called Novye Atagi. Here Lebed argued that he could guarantee a stop to the bombings, and that Russian troops would not storm the city once again, if the rebels would agree to a cease-fire.¹⁴⁰ Nine days later the “Khasavyourt Joint Declaration and Principles for Mutual Relations Accord” was signed by Lebed and Maskhadov in Dagestan. The accord, “expressed the will to protect unconditionally human rights and freedoms and those the citizen irrespective of ethnic origin, religious beliefs, place of residence, or any other distinctions.” It also contained provisions for Russian forces to leave the republic by 31 December 1996, and that a Joint Commission would be established to monitor the situation in the Republic. The first thing the commission was going to monitor was, “the fulfilment of agreed measures against crime, terrorism, and manifestations of ethnic and religious enmity.”¹⁴¹

Immediately opposition to the Khasavyourt Accords erupted in Russia. Interior Minister Anatoly Kulikov warned against “appeasing the aggressors” and described the agreement as a “cover for unilateral, boundless concessions in the most humiliating and destructive forms.”¹⁴² Duma Deputy Speaker Sergei Baburin also warned that the document

threatened the Russian constitution due to Article 65, naming Chechnya as an inalienable component of the Russian state. He also added, prophetically, “The shattered Chechen economy will become a ‘black hole’ through which criminals will pump oil, narcotics, and ill-gotten capital.”¹⁴³

Lebed made it clear from the start that he was not negotiating with Basayev or Raduyev. But the fact was that those two bandit, warlord-generals controlled close to thirty percent of the republic. If Ruslan “The Black Angel” Gelayev’s forces were added to this the number was closer to fifty percent of the republic under men who were not involved in the negotiations. Gelayev was a known *abrek*; a well-respected, fierce fighter who served under Basayev earlier in the war in Abkhazia; a known associate of the Jordanian Khattab; a severe Islamist who was involved in the August raid of Grozny that ended the war; and the future Prime Minister of Chechnya under Aslan Maskhadov. If the “cutthroat criminals” like Gelayev were allowed to continue to run unimpeded, the Russian press argued, they would continue acting with impudence against journalists, civilians, and human rights activists.¹⁴⁴

To that end, Russian forces quickly began rounding up and arresting *banditz* and commanders in large population centers such as Gekhi, Vedeno, Gudermes, Shali, and Argun. But crime continued. An estimated forty supporters of Doku Zavgayev, former Yeltsin appointee and Dudayev enemy, were rounded up in Urus-Martan and bludgeoned to death by apparent “drunkards and thieves.” Grozny was still filled with “criminal separatists” as they took over the northern airport in the capital. The Russians also admitted that robbery and other crimes were going up throughout the republic and that they had no way to stop it even though they were trying. For example, in Grozny, FSB and OMON troops were trying quite unsuccessfully to hunt down family members of the group “Dzhamaat,” a hostage-for-ransom collection of criminals led by the infamous, soon-to-be-rich, kidnapper extraordinaire Arbi Barayev.¹⁴⁵

Known as the “Rabid Wolf,” Barayev would play a larger role after the war, but by 1996 he was on Russian radar. “Dzhamaat,” the term for a historically and politically connected group in Dagestan, was created out of the warlord’s battalion that called themselves the “Armed Strength of Ichkeria.” Using their skill sets, the group was not only known for their murder-for-hire techniques, but also for building up bazaars in neighboring Ingushetia, Stavropol *krai*, and Dagestan that exported “goods for a living,” meaning drugs

and guns. It was only after the war in early 1997, that Barayev's *bandformirovanniyakh* became famous not for killing or peddling, but rather for their "friendly barter" of individuals.¹⁴⁶

As Russian forces were leaving the republic, the fact remained that crime was not being halted, but rather it was escalating and the Chechen Republic remained the main factor that influenced law and order in the entire Russian Federation. Besides the enormous amounts of illegal firearms in the republic, "contract" murders had gone up exponentially. Of 580 in the Republic in 1996 (more than 1.5 per day), only 78 were solved because the professionals moved cleanly and had no connection to the victims. Because of the high crime rate in the area, police task forces were routed from other areas of the Russian Federation into the North Caucasus to try and stop the flow of narcotics, humans, and weaponry that was moving in and out unmolested. The GAI, or Main Directorate for Road Traffic Safety, sent hundreds of police and highway patrolmen into the region that were otherwise used in order to halt the illegal movement of goods through the war zone.¹⁴⁷

Other special police squads were sent around the Republic looking for bands of criminals. In Stavropol *krai*, three people were arrested for stealing raw materials and goods worth more than a billion rubles from the warehouse of a joint-stock operations. In the Volgograd *oblast* northeast of Chechnya, Chechens were running a ring of stolen cars that they were supplying to other groups to commit muggings and thefts. The *bratva* stole the cars, altered the serial number, and then sold them to their accomplices. MVD operations in the republic itself in 1996 resulted in the confiscation of 44 armored vehicles, 274 artillery systems, 204 mortars and grenade launchers, almost a thousand rifles, 81,000 pieces of ammunition, and 104 kilograms of explosives. The operations traversed over 1.5 million square meters of the republic, during which 21,700 explosive devices were neutralized. As the 1997 MVD report stated, much of the crime fighting in the whole Russian Federation focused on Chechnya:

"Comprehensive measures have been taken to stop the activities of illegal armed squads in the Chechen Republic and border regions, the protection of important government facilities, including the nuclear power engineering network and the nuclear weapons complex, and participation in the maintenance of law and order and the guarantee of public safety in big cities and in residential communities with the highest crime rates constituted the basis of the military duties of internal troops of the Russian MVD."¹⁴⁸

The war also brought about a difficult scenario for human rights groups and European commissions because since Chechnya was a part of Russia the people who were fighting against the Russians were criminals. Although the war evolved into fighting terrorism as well, it never stopped being a war against illegal, armed groups of fighters. This made it hard when the war ended to give people, especially Chechens, amnesty for crimes committed during the war. Those convicted under Article 42 of the Russian criminal code including treason, espionage, terrorism, pre-meditated murder or bodily harm, rape, and malicious “hooliganism” (as discussed, a very broad term like racketeering in America), illegal possessions of weapons, and banditry, were not allowed amnesty. But because the Russian government did not specify how many people they arrested or under which articles they were tried and convicted of in the first place, it was unclear for groups like The Human Rights Watch, and the Chechens themselves, who would get amnesty. For most Chechens, it would never be clear. Much like it started, the war ended mired in controversy. Thousands of people were missing, accusations of heinous war crimes were thrown from each side, and the international community could do very little to help the republic.¹⁴⁹ As will be seen, a new criminal chaos reigned while the republic experienced three years of “independence” and a second war will follow.

Chapter 7: The Interregnum, the War, and the Kadyrovs

Even before the war ended, the centuries-old *abrek* tradition of kidnapping for ransom developed into a full-fledged branch of the economy. Starting in 1996, the number of kidnappings per year were in the hundreds, and the turnover ran into the tens of millions of dollars. One thing that many observers and released hostages were adamant about was that the kidnappings were purely for ransoms. One of the most brutal and notorious of the kidnapers, and alleged ally of al-Qaeda, was the field commander Arbi “The Terminator” Barayev. It was Barayev in 1996 that made it a lucrative business. He was known for torturing soldiers and hostages, and would personally finish off those whose ransom was not paid on time or in full. Some of his deeds will be discussed, but Barayev was the first of many “slave-trading generals.” They would set up a “slave market” where it was possible to negotiate, purchase, and exchange humans that were being held. Much like the Chechen *bratva* made a brand name, Barayev was known to give his “trademark” to other kidnapers who would use his name to get a large ransom in return for some of the profit. As Valery Tishkov argued, the kidnapping racket was an economic boon to the republic, and easily perpetuated itself: “According to the mathematics of hostage taking, each redeemed hostage cost the Russian side many times more than the sum of the millions of dollars of ransoms paid. The money was used for purchasing new abductions, robberies, and murders...It was precisely this economic activity, aided by drug trafficking and the shadow oil trade, that permitted the rebels to obtain modern arms.”¹

Hostage taking and contract killing by armed gangs were a nuisance to Dudayev, but to the soon-to-be elected Aslan Maskhadov, they were a severe problem. Chechnya became a hotbed of crime, and in the next two years, 506 cases of kidnapping were attributed to Barayev alone. He also boasted to have killed 150 people by his own hand, even family members.² He was an excellent recruiter, and his followers soon became known as the “Arbi Barayev Group.” His was the epitome of a terrorist-criminal organization that not only took hostages for ransom, but also committed terrorists acts against Russian Federal forces, the police forces of bordering republics, collaborators with Russians, and even against Chechen religious leaders and elders. When the war began, he was only twenty-one, but became the founder and field commander of the Islamic Regiment for Special Purposes. His network consisted of a few large armed groups and smaller, satellite groups with four or five members

in total. One such group was called the *Chernorechie* band. It consisted of four young Chechen men aged sixteen to seventeen whose leader was Kazbek Zaurbekov, a young man specifically recruited, trained, funded, and armed by Barayev himself. They were charged with terrorizing the public of people who were either Russian, or were alleged to have relations with them. The first act was a brutal murder of an elderly Russian woman in her house. The next was a double-murder of a Chechen woman and her daughter, both of whom worked in the market and were rumored to be selling drugs and dating Russian officers. The third act was a shootout with two Chechen policeman returning from work. No one was killed in the shootout, but the officers were wounded. What was interesting about Barayev, much like Labazanov, was that he was accused by his enemies of working for the FSB from the start.³

The Culture of Hostage Taking and de facto Independence

From 1996-1999 Chechnya enjoyed a de facto independence, but this ultimately failed for a variety of reasons. High on the list were clan loyalty, a high crime rate, mass armament, and nepotistic corruption. The bigger problem for the government was that the economy and everyday life was in shambles. Almost seventy percent of all houses were destroyed, fifty percent of the population were refugees, only ten percent were legally employed, and there were mines covering at least fifteen percent of the total cultivable land. Perhaps most importantly though, there was a generation of people who had grown up with automatic rifles, and the sense of superiority in the clannish society because they had made the Russian Army leave. Men with the classification of “Brigadier General” were especially popular, and the number of people who held this title skyrocketed *after* the war. As will be discussed, the political situation in the republic after Russia’s withdrawal was sporadic. The field commanders who felt they were not getting their fair share of political power or economic “benefits” began to dislike the government and the men running it; men like general-warlords Maskhadov, Basayev, and Raduyev. The commanders who were not in the inner-circle withdrew to their *auls*, where they built “family” bases, refusing to recognize the sovereignty of the central government and thus involving their whole clan in conflict with the regime.⁴

Another low-level civil war occurred as many members of the highland clans, including Aslan Maskhadov’s Alaroi, one of the original *teips* the Chartoi, and one of the best

known highland *teips* the Varandoi, amongst others, managed to occupy several important positions in the Republic at the expense of their lowland and city counterparts. Instantly, they did not hesitate to use the traditional means of “force” in order to gain control of limited economic resources, especially oil wells, which represented a source of steady income. In several regions, battles for wealth and position occurred between men who had just fought together against the Russians. Only after the war they were divided into armed formations according to clan or territory, and began fighting endless blood feuds and extorting money from members of weaker clans.⁵

Although the political situation was shaky at best, Chechnya did hold what outside groups believed to be a fair election. In January 1997, the quiet, pragmatic, neatly dressed, General Aslan Maskhadov became Chechnya’s newest President. His two main advantages were his war record, and his promise to make the republic more peaceful than his younger and more radical opponents. He won with more than sixty-five percent of the vote, at the time making Russia quite content with his raising popularity because it was Maskhadov who not only was a former Soviet General, but he also proclaimed at the Khasavyourt signing, “Russia can live without Chechnya, but Chechnya cannot live without Russia.”⁶

His main rival was the radical general Shamil Basayev who got twenty-three percent of the vote. After the election, in a show of solidarity Basayev was first named deputy chief of the Chechen Army, and later promoted to deputy prime minister. As the deputy prime minister, Basayev was in charge of industrial affairs, which meant he was also in charge of oil production. This gave him ample opportunity not only to enrich himself, but also to employ many of his armed followers.⁷ Like Basayev, Maskhadov was adamant about Chechen independence, but unlike his deputy prime minister, was willing to negotiate with Russia on some terms, and this brought him enemies quickly. This was quite interesting because Maskhadov’s own attitudes towards Islam were on the conservative side, and Russia rarely dealt with conservative Muslims.⁸ He was a Qadiriya Sufi, and encouraged the rebirth of Chechen religious traditions, but at the same time attempted, quite unsuccessfully, to ban the fundamentalist trend of Islam imported from Saudi Arabia called Wahhabism. He believed that a religious revival did not necessarily mean violence as many advocated in the republic, and really hoped for a moderate Islamic revival that would help bring peace and build

infrastructure claiming, “I envision Chechnya as an independent Islamic state...But not the kind of Islamic order that certain media describe. Hands or heads won’t be chopped off.”⁹

Trouble would soon follow the election as Salman Raduyev, the mastermind behind the Pervomayskoye hostage crisis, refused to recognize the results. Raduyev then threatened to “burn to cinders” at least three Russian cities if Moscow did not recognize Chechnya’s independence.¹⁰ In early March 1997, 3,000 of his armed supporters listened to ex-president Zelimkhan Yanderbiev’s speech at a rally in Grozny to proclaim the anniversary of the Pervomayskoye hostage raids as a “day of historic Chechen combat glory.”¹¹ It was clear from the start that Maskhadov had powerful enemies.

On 12 May 1997, Presidents Yelstin and Maskhadov met for the first time since the Chechen was elected. An economic treaty was signed, but independence was left off the table. The treaty allowed for loans from the Central Bank of Russia to be sent to Chechnya for reconstruction, and paying the very few government employees.¹² As an incentive to further economic cooperation, Security Council Secretary Ivan Rybkin, suggested offering Grozny a share of all tariffs from oil exports via Chechnya.¹³

Three days later, the kidnappings went into high gear. Unknown forces in Northern Chechnya kidnapped three journalists from the Russian television station NTV. President Aslan Maskhadov offered a \$100,000 reward for information leading to their safe release. Chechen Interior Minister Kazbek Makhashev called on the abductors to release the hostages in order to avoid getting the death penalty. Stating that the Chechen government did not have “authentic information” regarding the journalist’s whereabouts, Makhashev announced that he had “trustworthy information for optimistic forecasts.”¹⁴ On 18 August, three months after the kidnapping, the journalists were released through the effort of NTV director Igor Malashenko, and Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky. The latter acknowledged that the captives were ransomed for a “seven-figure dollar sum,” and will be at the center of many later negotiations and looked up on as an “honest man” by many of the Chechen kidnappers.¹⁵

Meanwhile, in an effort to get the Chechen economy going, Maskhadov tried to integrate the republic into the international oil market, and he needed westerners to do that. He also needed someone who had connections with the west so he tapped on the shoulder of Khozh-Akmet Nukhaev, the “father of the Chechen *mafija*.” Nukhaev had also been the chief of counterintelligence in Dudayev’s government before moving to Azerbaijan to

represent Chechnya's oil interests with the west. The President also created the Caucasian Common Market that had many western advisors, including men from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. In October 1997, the two Chechens met with Lord McAlpine, former advisor to Margaret Thatcher, to set up an investment trust to restore Chechen pipelines and refineries. The next March Maskhadov and Nukhaev flew to London and talked with Ms. Thatcher, then a board member of British Petroleum, about economic help for the republic. One month later, they had secured support of the North Caucasus pipelines with representatives from Georgia and Azerbaijan in which transporting oil across Chechnya would be key.¹⁶

Earlier in May 1997, while not claiming responsibility for the *NTV* journalist's kidnappings, Salman Raduyev announced that he did not believe Russian leaders would abide by the Russian-Chechen agreement signed on 12 May. He urged the Chechen leaders to take a tougher stance in their talks with Moscow and vowed to sabotage the existing oil pipeline in Chechnya in which Azerbaijan, Chechnya, and Moscow were negotiating to transport oil from Baku, Azerbaijan, through Grozny, to the Black Sea port town of Novorossisk.¹⁷

On 3 July, Azerbaijani President Geidar Aliev signed an agreement with Moscow to endorse the shipment of Caspian oil through Chechnya, with the financial support of British Petroleum. For the day, it seemed Maskhadov had won a small battle. But the next day, British aid workers James Jones and Camilla Carr were kidnapped. Despite the fact that no one took credit for the kidnappings, Maskhadov sent an anti-terrorist brigade into Arbi Barayev's territory in Urus-Martan looking for the Britons, but the operation was a failure when unanticipated resistance forces loyal to Raduyev forced Maskhadov's brigade to retreat, and the Britons were not found.¹⁸

The tit-for-tat continued throughout the rest of 1997. Despite more threats from Salman Raduyev of sabotage of the oil pipeline if Russia did not recognize Chechnya's independence and the looming disagreement over tariffs, Chechnya and Russia signed the oil agreement on 9 September.¹⁹ Two days later, unknown Chechen forces bombed a truck carrying four Russian workers to a repair site on the pipeline. On 15 September, Russia's Fuel and Energy minister Boris Nemtsov, announced that Moscow planned to construct a 283-kilometer pipeline across Daghestan to North Ossetia, cutting Chechnya completely out of the equation.²⁰

This is not to say that Maskhadov and many other Chechens were not trying to calm the criminality and kidnapping. All the political forces, Chechen and Russian, recognized the need to curb the situation as crucial to the existence of a functioning state. However, they viewed the social evil differently. Maskhadov recognized crime as a problem that should have been handled internally and consider all the illegal armed groups and criminal gangs as the main disrupting force for Chechnya becoming an independent state. His opposition, Shamil Basayev and others, viewed the flourishing of crime as the result of espionage, conspiracies, and collaboration with the Russians. They went so far as to pressure Maskhadov into hiring Abu Movsaev, a close Basayev friend and warlord, as the first director of the National Security Services. The agency was manned by ex-combatants, many of whom were criminals themselves, and just covering for illegal activities and sometimes participating in them themselves. Once Movsaev resigned, his successor, Lecha Khultygov, was the first man to officially declare a “war on crime,” and went after all illegally formed ex-combatant groups.²¹

Khultygov was in Maskhadov’s inner-circle, and the president also assigned Khunkarpasha Israpilov, as the head of the anti-terrorist center. At the same time he personally supervised police activities focusing on three main areas: combatting oil theft, hostage-taking, and combating the trafficking and production of drugs. The first round in a series of campaigns started in late May 1997, and was named “The Shield of Legal Order.” The mop-ups went after certain political-military groups that were threatening the stability of the government. In June of that year the “Shield” was tasked with dissolving the “Army of Dzhokhar Dudayev” led by Raduyev, and another armed group by the name of “*Borz*” (Wolf) headed by a Colonel Bakaev. Both groups had been in earlier scuffles with Maskhadov’s security services. However, one disadvantage that Maskhadov’s agents had was that they were less inclined to spill Chechen blood than their rivals. In June 1998, the group was tasked with investigating the illegal capture of “Grozneft” oil wells by an armed group of around 200 persons. The group was prepared to defend itself by arms, whereas Maskhadov told the “Shield” to try to negotiate rather than get into a shootout. Eventually the government troops left and the gang kept control of the wells. A year later, the special battalion, supported by police units, suffered a major defeat when it tried and failed to gain control over two oil wells

illegally captured by Wahhabi groups; choosing to issue warnings and negotiate rather than become involved in a firefight.²²

According to an OSCE report, the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe, who maintained permanent contact with influential groups, individuals, and structures of every day Chechen life, although Chechen law enforcement bodies were making some effort to combat crime, because of insufficient technical equipment and the non-payment of police officials' salaries their effectiveness was low. In a statement that would define much of the argument surrounding why kidnappings, oil stealing, and other crimes were so high, the OSCE argued, "one of the main reasons for the increase in crime is the large number of unemployed people with weapons."²³

Russian Commander Anatoly Kulikov, who was put in charge of the Interior Ministry after the Buddyonovsk hostage crises, argued that much of the crisis could have been averted had Moscow not been so vague and non-committal. If the Russians would have made sure that any economic agreements they made would put money in the hands of Maskhadov's government for rebuilding and employing people, and if they would have earnestly gone after men like Barayev, Raduyev, Basayev, and Khattab, perhaps things would have been different. But instead by the end of 1997, the powerful clans and armed warlords were running their own fiefdoms, and had very little fear of being reprimanded by the police or Maskhadov's security teams. He said that in that environment, all political, social, and everyday problems are best solved by violence, and a cult of "troublemakers" emerged. Criminals did not want full employment so they can recruit. They did not want economic peace treaties and oil pipelines running through their republic because then crime, kidnapping, and conversion to radical ideals goes down. Another fact is that Chechnya never recognized any Russian laws, meaning that although it was legally a part of Russia, the borders were patrolled only lightly and millions of illegal dollars from Russia proper were funneled through the republic. But men in the government like Basayev wanted that to occur. According to the MVD in 1997, Chechnya received more money illegally from Russia and the Middle Eastern States, then all of the other Russian Federation states combined. As Kulikov argued, "Hence it was a magnet for the most dangerous kinds of criminal activity...But if they had independence then it would be even more trouble to prevent it from becoming a transit base for weapons, drugs, and contraband."²⁴

Wahhabism

An anonymous Chechen wrote in 2003, “The term Wahhabism was unknown to us before the first Chechen war. I was surprised to hear that there are a lot of such newborn Islamic groups in Chechnya, most of which are being backed from abroad... These groups, mostly young people who up till today did not know even the basics of Islam, suddenly found themselves amongst the most radical people in Chechnya and have often caused a lot problems by continuously looking for open conflict and confrontation with traditionalists.”²⁵

No one is really sure why or who started calling the Sunni Islamic movement Wahhabism in Chechnya. Many of their tenets however, including their condemnation as idolatry the important Chechen tradition of venerating ancestors as saints, ran anathema to many of Chechen society’s norms. Founded in Saudi Arabia in the middle eighteenth century by Mohammed-Abd-al-Wahhab, it rejected both the Naqshbandi and Qadiriya Sufi brotherhoods interpretations of the Koran and believed that the *tariqas* and clan system were invalid. Strictly adhering to the Koran, Wahhabis did not drink or smoke, shave their beards, or recognize any government authority, except that of *Sharia* law. Perhaps most importantly, Wahhabis viewed armed *jihad* as the core of Islam, without which it was like a ‘lifeless corpse’, while the Sufis interpreted *jihad* predominantly in terms of spiritual perfection and an internal, daily fight against temptation.²⁶

In Chechnya’s case, the Wahhabis attempted to return the population to what it viewed as original Islam. Crucial to this transformation was the application of rules, norms and practices accepted in some Middle Eastern countries as opposed to the North Caucasus. Their ideology caused a great division among Chechens in that “traditionalists (who constitute the overwhelming majority of the population) associate Wahhabism with foreign influences that threaten their religious customs and identity.”²⁷

In many cases the Wahhabis, under Basayev, Raduyev, and Khattab, and the *tariqas* under Maskhadov and others, fought alongside each other in the first war to defeat the Russian forces. Among the volunteers to come and fight with the Chechens was a group of Arab veterans from the Afghan War against the Soviets. These were the ‘real’ Wahhabis, mainly of Saudi background, and were described as, “in possession of money, weapons, battle experience, and simple answers to problems. They attracted large numbers of Chechens as well as Daghestani and other Caucasian Wahhabis.”²⁸ It is estimated that 1,200 to 2,000

foreigners fought in the First Chechen War, many coming from not only Saudi Arabia, but also the UAE and Kuwait; all possessing experience from wars in Afghanistan, Kosovo, or Bosnia. There are no official statistics as to how much of the Chechen population converted during the first war, and the subsequent three years of independence, but estimates put it at five to ten percent.²⁹

If at times Wahhabis and Sufis fought together, in other instances they fought against each other. By the mid-1990's there was a simmering Islamic civil war within the war that observers likened to a political and spiritual turf-war. The schism began to surface in late 1994 when Sufi *imams* from Chechnya and Dagestan called on the faithful to "exterminate the bearded ones" as the worst enemies of Islam. As word got to the Wahhabis, a group of them invaded and tried to destroy an important shrine in the Qadiriya brotherhood: the grave of Hedi, the mother of one of the most revered saints in the Republic Kunta-Haji. An open clash began, and the Wahhabis were forced to retreat.³⁰

As the highly trained Wahhabis used precise movements to fight against *muridizm*, and the Sufi brotherhoods, many in Chechnya viewed the outside fighters and ideology as a cult. As early as 1994, in the Dagestani capital Makhachkala, Wahhabis and the two brotherhoods clashed in the streets. This was because one of the Wahhabis most ardent opponents was a Naqshbandi sheikh named Sayid from the village of Chirkei near the capital. A year later in the Chechen Kizliyar *raion*, a shootout left many wounded and at least one Wahhabi dead. Clashes also occurred between Wahhabis and ethnic Avars in the Khazbekovskom *raion*, in Khasavyourt they fought ethnic Kalmyks, and in the Novolaksnoi *raion* fighting ensued between the close ethnic relatives of the Laks and Chechen Wahhabis.³¹

According to the FSB, in 1994 the Saudi-based "Al-Haramayn Foundation," originally created to fund the war in Afghanistan, set up a fund called "The Foundation Regarding Chechnya," that filtered the foreign fighters into the battle. After the first war was over, the foundation moved its operations into Grozny and was financed through the Al-Barak Bank. In November of 1998, the Russian Security Services reported that at least \$10 million had been sent to the foreign militants during the first war, and that by 1999 the Al-Barak Bank had received another \$50 million in what they claimed was earmarked to buy weapons, food supplies, tents, and recruits.³²

The rise of Wahhabism cannot be completely blamed on foreign influences. Even in early 1996, President Dudayev argued, “Russia has forced us to enter on the path of Islam.” That year, in order to unify and consolidate power, a *ghazavat* was called against the external threat. A *sharia* criminal code was also created in order to establish order, to create a basis for regulating relations between the Wahhabis and the Sufis, and to stem the growth of crime. But what this did was split the population between the people who adhered to traditional customs and laws, and the ones who adhered to Islamic law, the Wahhabis who would also become known as Salafists. Much like Wahhabis, Salafists were hard to pin down, but in the Chechen sense it was someone who wanted to create a sharia-governed Islamic state. These were men like Basayev and Raduyev and their followers, who may or may not have been able to read the Arabic on their green head bands. Many people, including the highlanders with their personal sense of freedom, were opposed to the law codes. It was also unacceptable to many women as they worked just as hard as men and took an active role in all facets of social life. They also argued that it was an alien influence exerted on them by Arabs and foreigners. Zia Susuev, a member of the Presidium of the Executive of the United Congress of the Chechen People, argued, “We Chechens, the descendants of ancient Hurrite tribes and bearers of the Caucasian mountain people’s traditions, confront the threat of being turned into a section of faceless *umma* with the character and appearance of a Semitic tribe.”³³

Recruiting in the interwar period became a battle between the *tariqas*, the Wahhabis, and criminal groups; many of which were both religious and criminal. There were over 400,000 people in the republic out of legitimate work, almost fifty percent of the population, and thousands of whom were invalided and in need of medicine and rehabilitation. Many young Chechen men who were already armed joined one side or the other. The tough social-economic situation was ripe for the rise of criminality, and the Wahhabis began to roam the republic trying to stop the production and consumption of alcohol, the embezzling of oil, the theft of benzene, and other nefarious dealings, making enemies along the way. Things turned violent in the city of Gudermes in August 1998, when a shootout between a Wahhabi group and Chechen government guardsmen ended in the deaths of 30 Wahhabis, 10 innocent bystanders, and almost 20 guardsmen. A few months later, the Wahhabis also assassinated two well-known, powerful *muftis* Vakha Arsanov of Chechnya, and Saidmukhamed Abubakarov of Dagestan, who were very much their enemies. Grozny State University

Islamic scholar Vakhit Akayev, who never left the republic, wrote that in that sense, Chechnya became much like Afghanistan in that it had evolved into a civil war between Muslims. It had also brought on significant internal fighting between the Mafioso groups, and the Islamic brigades as they fought for not only religious, but also economic, supremacy.³⁴

Meanwhile, Shamil Basayev was becoming more powerful. At the beginning of January 1998, there was a mass exodus into Chechnya of almost 1,000 Wahhabis under the leadership of a man named Bagauddin from Dagestan. Republic officials decreed the sect illegal and went after them with efficiency, expelling most of the top echelon. The arrival of Bagauddin introduced an intellectual element into Chechen Wahhabism that “provided Shamil Basayev, Khattab, and the like with an ideological framework (for the future) intervention in Dagestan.”³⁵ Because of this, Basayev became more outspoken against the president and in June of that year, along with former Deputy Prime Minister-turned Maskhadov enemy Movladi Udugov he set up the “Congress of the Peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan,” to unite the two Republics under Islamic law.³⁶

Before the August shootout in Gudermes, on 14 and 15 July, fighting occurred outside the Chechen town of Urus-Martan between Maskhadov’s Chechen Presidential Guard and the Wahhabis from Dagestan killing over thirty, and wounding two-dozen more. Members of Udugov’s “Chechen Islamic Regiment,” the fighting arm of his “Islamic Way” political party converged on the city to lend support to the Wahhabis. After two days of intense fighting and dispelling the Islamists, Maskhadov spoke on Chechen television calling for concerted action against the groups who he said are “calling for war and trying to impose a hostile ideology on the Chechen people.”³⁷ He then labeled the Wahhabi/Salafists as *banditz* (this included Basayev and Raduyev), and called a *ghazavat* against them. The next day, much like his neighbors in Dagestan, Maskhadov issued a decree banning the group in Chechnya. He also disbanded Udugov’s Islamic Regiment for their help in the fight against the Presidential Guard. Dagestani *mufti* Abubakarov expressed his support for the ban, but prophetically the soon-to-be assassinated religious leader announced that he feared, “Maskhadov delayed too long in taking action against the Wahhabis.”³⁸

Aleksandr Zdanovich, the FSB Public Relations Director at the time, equated the fighting in the republic to a turf war between extreme “Islamic Brotherhood” organizations. The only difference between the groups was who was signing their checks. Money for

Maskhadov came from the West, Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. Whereas the Wahhabis were getting it from a large conglomerate that he termed the “Brotherhood of Muslims.” He partly blamed Russia arguing that the federation was not able to create some type of social stability, and new opportunities for gainful employment were nowhere to be found. Because of the lack of income for over eighty-percent of the population the two groups were able to purchase fighters with diasporic and Middle Eastern money, which in principle made the *bandformirovanniyakh* simple criminals because they were only fighting for money.³⁹

In many ways, the Wahhabis had become their own organized crime syndicate. They began making their own societies in almost every village and city within the republic and punished drinkers, smokers, prostitutes, and drug dealers. Much like the Chechen *bratva* in Moscow, the offender would get an initial warning to stop said crime. Repeat offenders were often beaten with sticks in the presence of a community commission symbolizing *sharia* law. Those who continued were expelled.⁴⁰ Playing on the complex and uncontrolled post-war situation, they also manipulated the community and played on inter-*teip* rivalries to conduct business with many local criminal organizations for economic gain. Chechnya was not only completely out of federal control, but it also underwent the process of spiritual awakening, high unemployment and mass migration; all things conducive to a rise in criminality.⁴¹ They would often pay up to \$100 per month, an enormous amount of money, to people who could infiltrate the growing number of criminal groups dealing in all sort of illegal activities. But perhaps most importantly, they were one of the groups that tried their hands at assassination, kidnapping for ransom, and drug running.⁴²

The group created its own parallel military structure aimed at scaring or killing its enemies. They abducted or beat up people with the butts of their guns accusing them of breaking all types of *sharia* laws. On 25 October 1998, they succeeded in killing the head of the Administration for Combating the Abduction of People in Chechnya, S. Bargishev. The assassination was carried out on the same day that the authorities had planned a large-scale operation against criminals of the trade. The next day, they failed in their attempts to take the head Chechen *mufti*'s life, Akhmad Kadyrov, and Sufi opponent field commander S. Yamadayev. On these attempts, Kadyrov commented that he had no enemies except the Wahhabis.⁴³ They interfered with wedding ceremonies or parties, banned dancing, and caused discontent throughout the republic. Nevertheless, much like their Chechen *bratva*

brothers they were also running a racket. It soon became clear that the “Islamic policing” was just a form of bribery: guards would go around punishing those in order to keep law and order, but the right amount of money could buy immunity from *sharia* punishment. In many people’s eyes, once this occurred, men like Khattab and Udugov were seen as nothing more than professional killers at the top of a violent extortion racket.⁴⁴

In some people’s eyes however, the Wahhabis were heroes. The notions of law and legality, and ruler and criminal, became confused. Or more to the point, there was not a distinct line between the two. Public floggings and beheadings for illegal sexual intercourse and severe criminal offenses like robbery and homicide were supposed to deter criminality in the republic. They did not, but the fact that the government was not able to prosecute, let alone stop, these things from happening, showed that the lines had been blurred. Chechen historian Vladimir Bobrovnikov even talks of public executions being shown on Chechen television as *sharia* courts and laws were supposed to be preventive measures. The idea was if a criminal knew that he or she would be punished no matter the case, that it was inevitable, said criminal would not commit the crime in the first place. This proved to be untrue, as the main people arguing for the courts were the ones who were raiding, killing, and kidnapping.⁴⁵

Their violence and flaunting of the law they themselves created though, soon turned much of the population against them. In 1998, numerous government reports, including one from the American Department of Intelligence, claimed that while he was still Deputy Prime Minister Movladi Udugov had discussed with some of Osama bin Laden’s men about running drugs from Afghanistan through Chechnya. He was also linked with the violent Filipino Islamic group Abu Sayyaf in running guns through the region, and giving some of its members low-level jobs in the Chechen Foreign Ministry to make it easier to do such things. The additional influence of outside fighters (almost a forty-five percent increase in the years 1997-1999), ideologies, and money began to cause huge rifts in society. It was the Wahhabis, Raduyev, Barayev, and Basayev, who began kidnapping civilians for ransom turning Chechnya into a “lawless, criminal state.” An example of this was in February 1999, when three kidnapers were apprehended near Grozny claiming they were not guilty because a *fatwa* had been issued by Abd ur-Rahman. He was a Saudi, military commander and “spiritual leader of Wahhabis” that had approved the kidnappings and payment of ransom.⁴⁶

Many ordinary people and journalists argued it was not “real” Chechens who were doing the kidnappings, rather it was outsiders, Russians, and pro-Russian Chechens committing the crimes. However, this was not completely the case. One documentarian’s interpreter was kidnapped, beaten, and put in a pit for months with very little food. After this had gone on, they then dropped an Ossetian in the pit whose brother was a wealthy businessman. On one occasion they cut off the Ossetian’s ear and sent it to his brother. The wealthy man appealed to both Maskhadov and Basayev to do something about it, and it was Basayev who went down there with his men and got the two men out of the pit while speaking Chechen.⁴⁷

This type of situation showed that Maskhadov’s power was waning, and his detractors used this to their advantage. A particularly brazen kidnapping occurred in early May 1998 when President Yeltsin’s envoy to Chechnya, Valentin Vlasov, was taken in broad daylight. This abduction however, according to the Chechens was not for economical gain, but rather it was “politically motivated and designed to aggravate tensions.” Vlasov, who was closely involved in trying to settle the crisis of the broken down legal system, was taken from his car near the village of Assinovskaya at high noon by a group of men who exited a black BMW at a stop light and began firing their weapons. Maskhadov immediately began a full investigation, and Movladi Udugov himself ruled out money as a factor blaming one of the many gangs roaming the republic at the time. In an interview Udugov did not say it was wrong, he just was curious as to why anyone would kidnap someone without the idea of making money off of it. He argued, “Once you start kidnapping officials, then there has to be some political motive behind it. I think only the stupidest idiot could imagine that any kind of ransom would be paid for a government official.”⁴⁸

Conflicting reports soon began to surface emanating from the Chechen government about whether there was a ransom. The Deputy Prosecutor General Magomed Magamodov reported that the kidnappers demanded a ransom of \$2 million through intermediaries. He also claimed that Vlasov would also be traded for the former Interior Minister of Ingushetia, Daud Korigov, who had been arrested earlier in Moscow on charges of “exceeding his legal authority.” This meant that he was the middleman for the Chechen gangs who specialized in kidnappings. Right after Magamodov’s statement conversely, Deputy Premier Kazbek Makhashev denied all of this saying they had no contact with Vlasov’s abductors.⁴⁹

What is known is this: on 20 September 1998, the two British aid workers that had been kidnapped fourteen months earlier, Camilla Carr and James Jones, were released. The Deputy Secretary of Yeltsin's Security Council, Boris Berezovsky, worked out a deal with Salman Raduyev. Berezovsky, a known investor in the Chechen oil pipelines had been privy to almost all discussions about transporting Caspian Sea oil in Grozny, Baku, Alma-Ata, and Tbilisi. He soon reported that he had secured their release by not giving the kidnappers the \$3 million they were asking for, but rather by donating computers and medical aid to Raduyev. The Ingush Interior Minister Khamzat Guseriev considered this a euphemism for a substantial ransom. As he put it, "Raduyev now has more computers than some Russian intelligence services possess."⁵⁰

Upon their release, the two British hostages told authorities that there was another man being held hostage with them, and after they described him it was clear the man was Vlasov. Before this, rumors had been circulating that Vlasov was dead. In November, after six months, he was released. Per usual, there were conflicting statements about whether a ransom was paid to secure his release. Russian Interior Minister Sergei Stepashin met Vlasov at the Moscow airport, and later denied any ransom being paid. However, Chechnya's Deputy Security Minister, Nasrudi Bazhiyeyiv, said that a ransom must have been paid in order for Vlasov to be let go, and all the ransom would go towards would be to finance the criminal group that kidnapped him. Insiders agreed that some \$3 million was paid for his release, and Bazhiyeyiv argued that there were no Russian troops in the vicinity of where Vlasov was being held, meaning there was no special operation to get him released. He said, "Russian interior ministry troops did not carry out any operation on Chechen territory...once again criminal groups have received money."⁵¹

It was common knowledge that Raduyev and Arbi Barayev were the masterminds behind both kidnappings. This seemed to be the case because earlier in October, two weeks after Carr and Jones were released, four engineers based out of the United Kingdom along with an American teacher at an orphanage were abducted by gunmen in Grozny. Two months later their heads were found in a sack on a roadside after a botched attempt by Maskhadov's forces to release the hostages. Their bodies were not found until Christmas Day, almost three weeks later, and no ransom was paid.⁵² As more information came in, observers noted that no ransom was paid because the British and Russians "only" offered \$10 million for the four

mobile phone engineers and the American teacher. Whereas, a little known group at the time, al-Qaeda, offered near \$30 million to Barayev, who was an ally and friend to bin Laden, to make sure that the gruesome scene would unfold near the holidays.⁵³

Kidnapping had become a scourge in Chechnya. In 1998 alone there were close to 700 total, and only the high priority abductees were released. The majority of victims whose ransom could not be paid were later found dead or not heard from again.⁵⁴ It became big business in between the war as an estimated \$200 million dollars were generated by the practice. A practice that had always been an established part of the *abrek* tradition. By 1998 though, the problem was it was difficult to distinguish between those that were carried out by Chechen gangs or other regional gangs to put pressure on an extortion target or potential witness; by groups with political agendas; or even representatives of the Chechen or Russian security forces who abducted kidnappers without warrant or identification for personal gain, interrogation, or detention.⁵⁵

Kidnapping was not the only plague to Maskhadov's government, low industrial output and oil piracy were both taking millions of dollars from the government every year. By 1999, only 9,000 Chechens were legitimately working in refineries, down by almost fifty-percent since before the war. Industrial businesses, from making equipment for the refineries to household goods, dropped from forty-four to seventeen. By this time, oil production was five to eight percent of pre-war level, unemployment was at eighty percent, and only one-third of all gainfully employed citizens were above the poverty line. There was also an estimated 800 "mini-refineries" that were illegally siphoning of oil from the pipelines, and guarded by unemployed young men and trained veterans. In all senses, the rule of gun prospered.⁵⁶

The Russians also became increasingly worried about the flow of money and funds into the republic. External Islamic sources ranging from Osama bin Laden to fifty or so pro-Islamic organizations in the United States were of major concern. There were also many Russian banks who paid protection money, *krysha*, as well as various other illegal rackets ranging from drug dealing to counterfeiting currency. In total, the Russian MVD calculated that in 1998 alone Chechen fighters had acquired \$4 billion dollars from such transactions. However, the main way to make money was through kidnapping, and it stretched throughout the Federation even into cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg. The reason for this was simply for the payday. A kidnapped Russian could bring between \$2000 and \$145,000, while

French and British citizens, which were the most coveted, could fetch at least \$1 million apiece.⁵⁷

In Fall 1999, there were still 851 people missing and or detained in Chechnya out of the 1,843 cases that had been monitored by the Russian Ministry of the Interior. The largest markets functioned in Urus-Martan and Grozny, where a person could easily buy or place an order for a captive, pay in advance, and name the type of person wanted: a businessman, officer, civil servant, and so on. There were many types of people who were seen as advantageous abductees, the first being construction workers. Masons, carpenters, and brick and tile layers were a commodity and were often passed from home to home for a small sum to do odd jobs until their families paid the ransom or they were released. As noted, politicians were sought after, as well as journalists and females. The latter for obviously unfortunate reasons. Another group that was targeted for ransom purposes were kids and young adults. The logic being that with young people the family would pay the money no questions asked. Kirill Perchenko, a twenty-two-year old was abducted in Moscow near the busy Kantemirovskaya metro station, and ended up in Chechnya with other abductees. His account may have been embellished by the Russian media, and the young man was lucky enough to make it back to Moscow, but he told *Argumenty i fakty* that when he reached Chechnya in a black van, it went as followed:

“I was taken to a suburb of Grozny, where we stopped in a field, they put me in a jeep, and they took me to an apartment in the center of the city. They played a videotape for me showing that Chechens executed their hostages... Then they took me to Urus-Martan, where they put me in a cellar with eleven men from Moscow, Dagestan, and Ingushetia. Then they took me to the mountains. There was a happy old man among us with two of his fingers cut off, and there were two young men who were later killed... The first man attacked a Chechen guard with a knife, but only wounded him. If he had killed him, we all probably would have been dead. They executed him in front of us by cutting off his head with a saw. Later, they took me and another prisoner, a Kazakh, down from the mountains to exchange us for the ransom. They handed us over to Wahhabis, and we were left in a boarded up room. We tore off the boards and escaped where we soon met a respectable-looking old Chechen with a mouth of gold teeth, and thought he was a man of Caucasian respectability. He was a local elder, and took us to the federal commandant’s office where riot police there searched and questioned us. They gave us cans of corned beef and condensed milk, and we devoured it all.⁵⁸

Likewise, Jewish people were known for “using their heads,” being successful, and became regular targets of abductors. It was also the case that many bandits were anti-Semitic,

and treated people of Jewish origin with particular cruelty. Arbi Barayev once declared that he would kill “all Jews that he captured,” and that it was his task to “shake Jews down for money and then annihilate them all.” Alexander Mukumolov, a Russian government peacekeeper who worked to free prisoners from their captors and had many dealings with Shamil Basayev and Arbi Barayev, commented that many Jewish men were kidnapped solely because it was thought their families were rich. Unsurprising, the abductors would usually make outrageous demands, and then lower the price once it was proven the family could not pay. Another route was to tell the family to get in touch with Boris Berezovsky in order to get the money. This was obviously far-fetched as most people did not know Berezovsky personally, but it did make the authorities suspicious as to what role the man played in all of the hostage-taking. Mukomolov recounted a case of an Israeli boy named Adi Sharon, who was released in about six months:

“Adi Sharon and his father, Joseph, were captured in Moscow in August 1999. The kidnapers showed them police credentials, then pulled sacks over their heads and spirited them off. The next day they released the father but took the boy away. I have Joseph’s letter to Lebed (Alexander Lebed, Secretary of the Security Council) in which he puts the ransom figure at \$170,000...Sharon started by finding an intermediary from Ingushetiya and giving him \$50,000, but that man died and the money was lost.”⁵⁹

Mukomolov goes on to discuss how he obtained a recent photograph of the boy from the kidnapers, and in May 2000 he was released. But not before an unknown Chechen had cut off two phalanges of one of the boy’s fingers, and sent them to his father.⁶⁰

Russian journalists Sanobar Shermatova and Leonid Nikitinskii did an expose on these “slave-trading generals,” including the less infamous, but still lethal Akhmadov Brothers of Urus-Martan, and Baudi Baluyev who was not known outside of Chechnya. The Akhmadov brothers, Uvais, Ruslan, Rizvan, Aпти, Abu, Ramzan, Imran, Tagir, and Zelimkhan, were only second to Arbi Barayev and enjoyed a successful run in between the wars until one of them was killed in December 1999. It is not known how much they made over the course of their kidnappings, but it was estimated in the tens of millions, and what they were better known for was evading the federals and fleeing into the mountains outside of the city where they had set up their own slave market. By the start of the war, they had dispersed, and many in Chechnya say that they had promised to stop resisting Russian forces for safe passage. It is also possible that they paid for passage out of Russia by giving up two Polish women they took hostage in

Dagestan and kept in their hometown. The women were released in the mountains and made to walk about ten miles in a heavily armed and disputed area.⁶¹ The brothers then split up, but from 1999-2002, in the course of Russian “special operations” seven of the nine brothers were killed, and only Uvais and Imran had survived. One year later, Uvais was arrested and let go by the Turkish police as they thought he had tried to assassinate the former head of the Chechen *sharia* court, Shamsuddin Batukaev. In August 2001, Musa, Uvais’s son, was arrested for fighting the Russians, and his elder brother Adam was killed that same month by the Russians.⁶²

Baudi Bakuyev, a true *abrek*, was probably the man who held presidential envoy Valentin Vlasov for Raduyev and Barayev. But it is said that unlike the more notorious men he never harassed his captives. In true *abrek* style, after gaining his ransom from Vlasov (unofficially from \$3 to \$7 million), he handed out \$100 to every family in the cities that he patrolled, including Petropavlovskoye, Ilyinka, and Dolinsk. No one claimed that the money was from that ransom, but the people in the villages linked the dates of his release to the timing of the unexpected gift. In 2000, Baudi was only thirty-four years old, had fought in the first war, and was well known for his retrieval skills. At the beginning of the first war, President Dudayev set up a special squad through secret decree for capturing Russian officers to obtain information. He entrusted the task to former policeman, Vakha Arasnov, who would later be Maskhadov’s Vice-President, and Baudi Bakuyev.⁶³ Once the second war started, Bakuyev was tasked with the same job, and only a month into the war he successfully kidnapped Major General Mikhail Malofeyev from the streets of Grozny. In the panic, all the Russians would say is that the Major General “got into a complicated situation.” Bakuyev, however, told reporters that “Malofeyev is absolutely healthy and is answering investigator’s questions.”⁶⁴

Advisors and observers to the OSCE commented that by 1998 the security of the republic had deteriorated to “endemic proportions.” The every worsening socio-economic conditions, crime, unrest, acts of terrorism, and especially hostage-taking and abductions for ransom, had created a society where there was a general breakdown of law and order. Virtually all international institutions had left the region. By the end of 1998, the OSCE Assistance Group was the only one left. But to provide safety to their employees, most of their work was done in Moscow.⁶⁵

The Move Toward War

The turn of the year did not make the situation better. In March 1999, Russian Deputy Interior Minister, Major General Gennady Shpigun, was taken out of his plane in Grozny on his way to Moscow. Though no one took responsibility for the action, Interior Minister Sergei Stepashin vowed that if Shpigun were not released in a timely manner, Moscow would pursue rigorous measures to “ensure law, order, and security in the republic.” He also criticized Maskhadov’s unsuccessful efforts to crack down on the drug trade, banditry, and kidnapping, stating, “in effect, several thousand armed scoundrels dictate their will to Chechen society, driving it into medievalism and obscurantism.”⁶⁶

The same day, Maskhadov’s press secretary responded by blaming the Russian authorities for evading the president and dealing with his rivals in most of the kidnapping cases of important officials and foreigners. He also suggested that Russian intelligence services had conspired with Shamil Basayev to abduct Shpigun. This type of accusation that Chechen rebels were working with the FSB or MVD were widely used at this time, but further investigations into many of them proved to be true.⁶⁷ Basayev denied responsibility, but urged whoever had abducted Shpigun to turn him over to *sharia* court as a war criminal, and the renegade Movladi Udugov threatened reprisals against Russian politicians if Moscow attacked Chechnya.⁶⁸ President Boris Yeltsin later wrote about Shpigun’s kidnapping, “Maskhadov, who right up until this incident had maintained that his law enforcement agencies were cooperating with Russia’s efforts to free hostages, had clearly lost control of the situation. He no longer had any authority in the Chechen Republic.”⁶⁹

The next month, a slew of kidnappings and deaths in the northern Stavropol region prompted Stepashin to close the border. He declared, “It will be closed for gangsters, not civilians,” adding, “this will effectively be a war zone.” Russian helicopter gunships began patrolling the area.⁷⁰ In May, the Interior Ministry reported an attack by unknown Chechens on a Stavropol military outpost, killing two and wounding five. Russia retaliated with helicopters firing forty missiles at “strategic” Chechen rebel hideouts on the border.⁷¹ Chechen Security Minister Turpal Atgeriev took the blame for the attacks, and the MVD arrested him in July. They later had to release him because of lack of evidence, but this made President Maskhadov upset and he closed all the offices of Chechnya’s representatives in the Russian Federation, including the office in Moscow.⁷² To further show his disdain, the

president appointed Ruslan Gelayev, a known bandit, *abrek*, and ally of the Wahhabis, as First Deputy Premier in charge of law enforcement; a known criminal was now the top law enforcer in the republic.⁷³

Invasion and More War

The Second Chechen War, and the meteoric rise of Vladimir Putin, was set in motion on 4 August 1999, when a force of 1,500 to 2,000 Wahhabi fighters allegedly including Arabs, Central Asians, and Chechens, invaded Dagestan. The force was led by Basayev and Khattab in an effort to create a united Islamic state, and was equipped with two armored personnel carriers, an anti-tank gun, and air defense systems. At the request of Dagestani officials, Moscow sent an Interior Ministry battalion and a Russian army battalion into the Tsumadin and Bolikh districts that the Wahhabis took over without firing a shot.⁷⁴ According to the Dagestani government, they had made requests for more troops on the border as they watched the “criminals in Chechnya,” form armed bands in the hopes of invading the neighboring republic. The two Chechen commanders, along with Udugov and the radical Dagestani Wahhabi, Bagauddin Magomedov, declared the operation was called “Khazi Muhammad,” in honor of the first Dagestani imam. Three days later, Basayev proclaimed himself “Emir of the Islamic State of Dagestan,” and Khattab made clear his objective to create an “Islamic Caucasian state extending from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea.”⁷⁵

In Chechnya, President Maskhadov explicitly denied any involvement with the “bandit raids,” claiming Basayev’s forces had neither relations nor financial assistance from the Chechen government.⁷⁶ On 10 August, newly appointed Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who had replaced Sergei Stepashin, reported that President Yeltsin instructed him to impose order and discipline in Dagestan, and that Russian forces would resolve the situation in “one-and-a-half to two weeks.”⁷⁷ A month later, the Prime Minister made one of his many infamous quotes, promised to find the culprits in gangland rhetoric, “We will follow terrorists and criminals everywhere. We will corner the bandits in the toilet and wipe them out (*motchiit v sortire*).”⁷⁸ The FSB followed suit labeling Basayev and Khattab two of the most “serious criminals” in the Russian Federation, *banditz*, and terrorists who do not follow any just laws. The security service argued that they had tried to fight them by legal means, mainly through the economic and physical buildup of post-war Chechnya. But since the invasion, that

was impossible as their *bandformirovanniyakh* started another armed conflict, and the only way to stop them would be to “take out the heads of these criminals and *banditz* through antiterrorist operations.”⁷⁹

Likewise, right after the invasion Basayev was not silent either. In a September interview with journalist and First Chechen War correspondent, Thomas de Waal, he backtracked on the importance of Islam in the invasion. The journalist pointed out that Dagestan had very few Wahhabis, and he and Khattab never had more than 3,500 fighters with them at any one time. When Basayev was asked whether his radical, Jordanian friend who had married a Chechen women was a “Wahhabite,” Basayev answered, “No, he is a Khattabite.”⁸⁰ A few months later, Basayev swore on the Koran that Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky had given him \$3 million to finance the incursion into Dagestan; lending to a theory that the invasion into the republic was preemptively planned by Russian and Chechen security services and elites who would not only profit from a new war, but it would give an excuse for another invasion in the problematic Republic.⁸¹

Berezovsky had an interesting relationship in the events of Chechnya. The “pro-Yeltsin, Gucci-dressed Rasputin of the 1990’s,” had allegedly been taped numerous times talking with the Chechen rebels. Even the newspaper that he owned and did not write anything he did not approve, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, alleged that the circumstances surrounding the war were highly suspicious. A month after the initial incursion, the newspaper ran a front-page article, arguing, “It is completely obvious that the Chechens were lured into Dagestan... Here is my personal hypothesis: Berezovsky could have been used and kept in the dark by the Russian special services, or even more likely – he could have acted in concert with them.” The question was asked: why would Berezovsky let the cat of the bag? Many observers and journalists argued that it was an attempt to warn the Kremlin, which had now been taken over by Vladimir Putin that Berezovsky would spill the beans if he was put in danger.⁸²

The oligarch was directly involved in at least six different hostage negotiations, including Camilla Carr and John James and Russian envoy Valentin Vlasov. He was also involved, mostly on the money end unofficially, in the ransom negotiations for almost all of the FSB and MVD agents who had been kidnapped during the interwar years, including the head of the Ingushetia FSB. He had direct contact with Basayev and Maskhadov, and was

one of the main men who negotiated for the release of Major-General Gennady Shpigun. He was also known for nefarious deals. In 1997, it was alleged that he gave Basayev \$2 million in order to rebuild a cement plant in Chiry-Yurt. No one knows where that money went, but an unidentified Chechen said that Basayev kept half of it, and gave the rest to Maskhadov. What is known is that a cement plant was never built.⁸³

The relationship that may or may not have been amicable between Berezovsky and president Maskhadov was moot as the Chechen government quickly blamed the oligarch for partly financing the invasion into Dagestan, and dealing with unsavory characters. The head of the General Procurator's office, Pavel Barkovsky, officially stated that Berezovsky was the main financier of many illegal armed groups in Chechnya. What was unfortunate for Maskhadov was that journalists and the Procurator had audio, video, and stenographic evidence of meetings instigated by Berezovsky between the Chechen Interior Minister Khazbek Makhachev, and a Georgian "specialist" that went by the name of Badri. At the meeting there was an exchange of money that was supplied by Berezovsky to the Chechen minister and given to the Georgian for arms. Those arms would later end up in the hands of then Chechen Vice-Premier turned bandit-terrorist Movladi Udugov. Interpol would also get involved, and Makhachev would later confess that Berezovsky gave the Chechens almost 30 million rubles with the goal of invading Dagestan. To distance himself from this, Maskhadov argued that Berezovsky had relations with almost any Chechen who was fighting him for power, and in practice, "the whole spectacle in Dagestan was created by him."⁸⁴

Outside of Chechnya, things also were getting violent. On the last day of August, a bomb exploded in a shopping complex off Red Square, killing one person and wounding forty more. Two weeks later Basayev attributed the blast to his Dagestani allies.⁸⁵ Five days later, another blast in Buinaksk, Dagestan killed sixty-four, and wounded a hundred more.⁸⁶ Then, in the early hours of 9 September, an explosion at an apartment house in southeastern Moscow left over twenty people dead and another 250 people wounded.⁸⁷ Four days after, a bomb equal to 440 pounds of TNT exploded, leveling an apartment building on Moscow's Kashirskoye Road. The total death count reached 121 sleeping people, while the wounded was well over two hundred. Interior Minister Vladimir Rushailo was adamant that the two apartment explosions were the result of "one and the same team of terrorists," adding, "we

have no doubt that events in Dagestan and the explosion in Buinaksk and Moscow are links in the same chain.”⁸⁸

Because of the bombings, which are seen in Russia as their 9/11, Putin labelled all Russian military action henceforth in Chechnya as an anti-terrorist operation. This was a savvy move because under the Russian constitution operations labelled as such did not need approval from the duma, or a declaration of a state of emergency in Chechnya.⁸⁹ A couple weeks after, Putin publicly declared the 1996 Khasavoyurt Peace Accords to be “meaningless scraps of paper,” and claimed that Aslan Maskhadov was not the legitimate president of Chechnya even though he had been elected in 1997 legally.⁹⁰

The apartment bombings and the Second Chechen War have been covered extensively, but one thing that is interesting is over fifteen years after the buildings were bombed, an official report has still not been published. Little is known about the “seemingly random” attacks that killed 300 people, started a new war, and saw the rise of Vladimir Putin. No matter the culprits of the apartment bombings the Prime Minister was quick to blame the Chechens, and reprisals soon followed. On 1 October, Russian Defense Minister Igor Sergeyev called for another full-scale invasion of Chechnya.⁹¹

Ten years later, journalist Scott Anderson wrote an article that was banned in Russia. He went to the memorial where the apartment building on Kashirskoye Road used to stand, and found a couple of elderly men putting down flowers. Both had heard the sound of the apartments blowing up, but one had a more personal connection as he had a daughter, son-in-law, and grandson die that day. The *stariik* (a venerable term for old man in Russian) led Anderson up to the memorial and showed him the names of his family that he had lost. Then he whispered, “They say it was the Chechens who did this, but that is a lie. It was Putin’s people. Everyone knows that. No one wants to talk about it, but everyone knows that.” The question remains today whether Putin and the FSB orchestrated the bombings, and several western intelligence agencies conducted investigations into them. Surprisingly, or not so surprisingly, one prominent Westerner who argued that the FSB could have been involved in the bombings was US Senator John McCain. But neither the US press, government, nor their European counterparts have publicly given an account for what happened.⁹²

Nevertheless, two days before Sergeyev’s call for invasion, Putin acknowledged that Russia was still prepared to begin negotiations with President Maskhadov, but only under

certain conditions. Maskhadov had to condemn terrorism “clearly and firmly,” rid Chechen territory of all armed “*banditz*,” and express a readiness to extradite all Chechen and Wahhabis to Moscow. Putin also stated that Russia was not willing to begin a replay of the first war because it could lead to “unnecessary casualties among the troops.” But he added that he still did not exclude a ground attack to “solve the main task—destroy the *banditz*, their camps and infrastructure.” By the end of September, even though not officially at war, some 281 Russian soldiers had died and another 930 were wounded in six weeks of fighting.⁹³

There are many hypotheses that hold to the idea that the Chechen conflicts had evolved from the first war being about secession to the second war starting to defeat radical Islam. Putin himself called the Second Chechen War, a “war on terror,” two years before that phrase became common in the West. After the apartment bombings he received carte blanche from the citizenry to attack Chechnya. This was surprising because just three years before the Russians had negotiated a ceasefire in an egregiously unpopular war. But when violence struck the homeland, according to Russia’s Finance Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, “They simply closed their eyes and let him do whatever he wanted as long as he saved them from this threat.”⁹⁴

However, one thing cannot be overlooked: the rhetoric for starting the first war and the second war remained the same. There were changes in the words as “Wahhabis,” or “terrorists,” were used to describe the people the Russians were going to war against. But in the end the Russian government still referred mainly to the people they were fighting by two words: *banditz* and *prestupniki*, or bandits and criminals. FSB Major-General Aleksandr Zdanovich argued that it did not matter where they came from they were all criminals. During the second war, he heard men on the radio talking in Arabic, all the Central Asian and Baltic languages, Russian, and Ukrainian; and one thing he always could depend on was they were fighting for money. He did acknowledge that Khattab and Basayev were closely linked to the dangerous Egyptian cleric Abu Omar who resided in Milan at the time, but he also argued that at their roots the two men were simple criminals. They armed small groups of men that numbered from three to ten with an unlimited illegal supply of guns that were coming into the republic, and it did not matter what nationality they were. He called Maskhadov a criminal, and added that by the invasion it was useless communicating because in the region the *banditz* had strongholds and “they were everywhere.”⁹⁵

This was an interesting tactic because at the beginning it gelled the disparate Chechens together. Maskhadov and Basayev both assured the public that they had nothing to do with the apartment bombings, and that they would unite all Chechens to fight the Russians. It was important also that Basayev did not take or give credit for the bombings. Terrorist's reputations and validity rest on their actions, and doing exactly what they say they are going to do. For Basayev to not claim responsibility meant that there was a very high likelihood that he did not commit the crimes. By this time, however, even the reasonable Maskhadov began to alienate moderates with his words as he vowed, "Russia was always looking for some way to weaken us, with some sort of provocation or sabotage. They have been the bosses around here for a hundred years...we will protect our land and Russia, if it comes in to occupy it, will be annihilated."⁹⁶

On 31 December 1999, President Boris Yeltsin surprised the world with a hasty resignation. The president's taped New Year's address aired showing an ill, but eloquent Boris Yeltsin giving his powers as president to Premier Putin, asking the Russian public, "Is there any use in clinging to power for another six months, when the nation has a strong leader who is prepared to be president and who symbolizes the hope of Russian citizens for the future?"⁹⁷ Under the Russian constitution, if the president resigned before a term was completely finished, the prime minister would then become acting president as well as prime minister until new presidential elections. In these circumstances, new presidential elections could be held as early as three months after the president resigns.⁹⁸

Chapter 8: Putin's War

Less than 24 hours after becoming acting president, Vladimir Putin flew to Chechnya and presented hunting knives as gifts to Russian soldiers stationed in the city of Gudermes, east of Grozny. He told the troops that their main task in fighting the Chechens was to put an end to the disintegration of the Russian Federation, adding that he did not rule out negotiations with Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov if Maskhadov denounced terrorism and extradited those responsible for the apartment bombings. Chechen Vice-President Vakha Arsanov denied that Chechens were involved in the bombings and said that Putin's remarks, "demonstrate that the Russian leader has no desire to improve bilateral relations."¹

In March, an unidentified body was found in a shallow, mass grave outside of the southern town of Itum-Kale. It turned out to be Gennady Shpigun's. Throughout the year that he was a prisoner, the *banditz* had constantly changed his whereabouts making any rescue attempts futile. It is not known how Special Envoy Shpigun got into the grave, but one rumor was in his weakened state his heart gave out during a trek through the mountains. Another tale was that he managed to escape, but got lost in the mountains, got frostbite, and starved on his way to find Russian units. According to the Russian press, his captor was almost certainly a man by the name of Abdul-Malik Mezhidov, an associate of Ruslan Gelayev, Basayev, Khattab, and Arbi Barayev.² Mezhidov specialized in kidnapping, and ran his "business" out of his main "prisons" in the village of Alkhan-Kala. He also was a good raider ransacking neighboring villages in Ingushetia for money and people to later station some of his men and plunder in the infamous Pankisi Gorge, which will be discussed as an important hideout for criminals running guns, drugs, and people through Chechnya into Georgia onto Europe and beyond.³

On 20 April 2000 Putin told reporters that he still believed Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov was a "criminal," but one that could be pardoned. Maskhadov had ordered all Chechen guerrillas to suspend combat operations as part of plan for a peaceful settlement with Russia. But by 22 April, Maskhadov complained that his overtures to Moscow had gone unanswered, while Putin exchanged that Maskhadov had let negotiations lapse into silence and did not have the power to order a cease-fire, stating, "He (Maskhadov) decides nothing and will never decide anything."⁴

In June, Putin signed an order establishing an interim civilian administration in Chechnya that would report directly to the Kremlin. He appointed Chechen mufti Akhmad Kadyrov as its president even though Aslan Maskhadov had declared Kadyrov “an enemy of the Chechen people”. Kadyrov had fought for the Chechen separatists against Russia in the first war, and then changed sides after the conflict was over. Unfortunately for Putin, Kadyrov was viewed by many Chechens as a traitor, and local Chechen administrators working with Moscow resigned due to his appointment. The Chechen leadership also put a \$250,000 bounty on Kadyrov’s head, with a Mercedes jeep thrown into the deal.⁵

Three months later, on 31 October there were two unsuccessful attempts on the mufti’s life. The first was a suicide bomber who blew himself up near Kadyrov’s headquarters, but did not get close enough to kill the pro-Moscow leader. That same evening, at around 9 p.m., a column of five cars in his entourage came under heavy fire from a post of Russian federal forces near the village of Bachi-Yurt. Kadyrov himself would have been hit, but he shoved aside his driver who had been hit and raced his jeep out of the killing zone.⁶ It was a “miracle” that he survived and the deputy procurator of Chechnya, Said Pashayev, harangued that the soldiers manning the post had been drunk, “Often the military, being intoxicated, open fire on everything that moves.” This angered Putin and a commission was created to investigate the incident.⁷

Although the June appointment of Kadyrov was Putin’s way of saying hostilities had gone down, violence ensued. Russian General-Lieutenant Stanislav Voronov of the FSB, a man who fought in both Afghanistan and Chechnya, likened the war to the Afghanistan conflict. But unlike the Soviet War in Afghanistan that was fought for independence, the Second Chechen War had become a fight of common criminality and banditry, and it was not clear always who was fighting whom. Men like Basayev, Khattab, and Raduyev “have no use for peace, they are pitiful and only useful as fighters, and therefore they need war.” According to him, of the over 145 Chechens criminals that the FSB was able to actually catch and arrest, only one was given detention by the Chechen authorities, and the rest got released and went to hide in the mountains. It was not just the terrorists though, the Russians were fighting economic criminals, oil siphoning, and traders in guns, contraband, drugs, and allegedly radioactive material. The war, much like the semi-anarchy that ensued after the first

war, did not hinder the criminality in the region, it only exacerbated it into an “avalanche that cannot be stopped.”⁸

The FSB was particularly concerned with the “white death” (heroin) trade, which was being run by the narco-Mafioso clans of “Caucasian” origins. However, the Tajiks, Roma (gypsies), and Afghan nationals were also heavily involved in the trade. The Chechen diaspora was spread throughout Russia, and into Turkey, and the FSB regarded it as a known fact that they actively worked with each other to move product for their clans and for the Wahhabis. The FSB followed money transfers and how it was dispersed through the diaspora for obtaining Russian citizenship, acquiring apartments, *dachas*, cars, restaurants, hotels, and so forth. These Chechen groups were the “pioneers” of the families, they were unscrupulous, tight-lipped, and would do anything for the good of their clan.⁹ FSB public relations officer Aleksandr Myrashov echoed these sentiments in 2003 at a news conference allowing that the 2.5 million illegals in Russia at the time, and the almost 1 million in the Moscow *oblast* itself, were too hard to control. It was not just the drug routes and the arms trade, but the fact that the borders were so large and porous that the economy and safety of many Russian citizens was being destabilized by groups trafficking in illegal goods.¹⁰

The dominant role of Chechens was on the Russian end of the Central Asian narcotics routes. An unidentified Tajik drug trafficker was interviewed in 2002 by Russian journalist Yuri Spirin. The man admitted that he sold most of his merchandise in Russia to Chechens rather than Russians, commenting:

“The ones I cooperate with are very strong gangs involved in robberies, bank scams, and legal business. They have great connections among the police and among functionaries at all levels. Thanks to those connections, the Chechens can save you from any kind of trouble....If one is in real trouble, one takes a suitcase of dollars and goes cap in hand to the Chechens and solves the problems with their help. It is difficult to work without their help—we are too small. Tajik groupings as such do not exist.”¹¹

Once the second war started, the Moscow authorities believed that refugees flooded the area and as of 2015 there are still anywhere from 50,000 to 100,000 still living in the capital. The only difference after the second war started was that for the most part the Chechens maintained a low profile. Much of this may have been due to the idea that the main Chechen and Russian *bratvas* from the mid-1980’s to the late 1990’s earned “fabulous wealth” in the no-man’s-land that was left after the planned economy went away. By the late

1990's, they had no interest in "dirtying their hands" with drugs and other nefarious activities. They usually had the opposite problem, and that was how to legitimize their ill-gotten fortunes and gain a respectable reputation. Many did this by buying real estate in chic areas of European cities like London and Paris, and sending their children to expensive private schools.¹² However, this did not stop the police from harassing people whom they believed to be criminals. As stated, Chechens had been accused of the apartment bombings, were still being illegally detained through the *propiska* (resident permit) system, and even tortured at the hands of the police. In an interrogation of an anonymous Chechen, a Moscow policeman was reportedly to have spoken, "The only good Chechen is a dead Chechen."¹³

The war also had a negative impact on those Chechens providing *krysha* as their main business activity. By the end of 1999, up to forty percent of the businesses that the Chechens protected were taken away from them by what was called "government mafias," meaning the Moscow police, the FSB, and the MVD. The Chechen "*biznezmen*" who were not in the business of providing protection, however, had closer ties to the security services, and were then allowed more opportunity to flourish, as opposed to the Chechen *bratva* itself. Because of this, a turf war began between the ethnic gangs and the Russian police. The security services systematically arrested Chechens by planting drugs or weapons on them while accusing suspects of belonging to the armed units fighting in Chechnya. Granted, many of these sweeps did actually net real criminals, but they more frequently amounted to harassment and racketeering charges against normal citizens. In 1999 alone, over 5,000 Chechen males were arrested in the Moscow *oblast*.¹⁴

In a localized account, a household of four Chechen women in Moscow ran a legal, registered bakery from their home. In December of 2001, a group of masked men burst into their apartment at 4 in the morning, and instead of showing them a warrant one of them was holding a bag of drugs. The men said that the women would either face arrest for possession or hand over their jewelry and cash. Similar incidents were reported in other cities throughout the Federation, and in Moscow itself, it became very hard for Chechens to rent apartments because landlords knew they would be subject to extra scrutiny. Rather than stopping this behavior, many Russian leaders viewed the racketeering of the security services as the most effective way to stomp out the *bratva*, and in many cases it worked.¹⁵

According to local law enforcement agencies throughout the Federation though, by the end of the 1990's the Chechens were heavily involved in the supply and distribution of illegal drugs outside of Moscow and in neighboring North Ossetia, as well as the far corners of the Russian Federation from the Kurgan region in the Urals to the Tyva Republic in Eastern Siberia. Their role may have been overemphasized in places, especially in Orthodox Republics like that of North Ossetia, where racial and ethnic lines were used to create an archetypal dealer. They were also accused by the North Ossetian press and the government of employing drugs to weaken the Christian people and corrupt their genetic makeup. On 10 December 1999, the *Severaja Ossetia*, the most widely read newspaper in the republic wrote:

“The spread of narcotics in our republic goes beyond drug traffickers’ financial interests and assumes the character of a clearly-planned, long-term action. The specialists of the Drug Control Department of the North Ossetian Ministry of the Interior are currently analyzing shocking information: our republic has been recently supplied from *certain regions* (italics added, it means Chechens) with heroin that was cut with the blood of AIDS-infected people... There are grounds to talk about a specific attack against the genetic make-up of the North Ossetian nation.¹⁶

Map 4: The Pankisi Gorge



The Pankisi Gorge

Much of this had to do with the Pankisi Gorge that borders Chechnya with the breakaway region of South Ossetia and Georgia. The gorge is just eight miles long, two miles wide, and is home to a people of Chechen origin called the Kists. They make up seventy-percent of the 15,000 or who live there, and the unemployment rate steadily hovers around ninety percent. When the second war began 7,000 documented Chechens fled into the gorge along with a large number of rebels. The fighting then distracted the authorities from the fact that the gorge became a safe haven where abductees were held, and drugs and guns were moved with ease. It did not help that by most accounts some rebels had ties with officials in the anti-Russian Georgian government. Two of the more famous abductions that took place in the area was a May 2001 kidnapping of Levan Kaladze, the brother of a soccer star in Milan, and the November 2001 abduction of a monk, Father Basili Machitadze. Both would later be released through the help of the Georgina government. Noting the link between the mostly-Chechen *banditz* and the police, a resident of the gorge village of Matani, Nugzar Zazgaidze, said in a January 2002 phone interview, “the drugs business is in the hands of the local police and anyone arrested is quickly freed by just one phone call to a well-placed member of the Parliament from Tbilisi (the Georgian capital).”¹⁷

The most notorious, and influential of these Georgian officials was the Minister of Internal Affairs and Police Lieutenant General Kakha Targamadze. From 1995-2001, he oversaw, and some say facilitated, the rise in terrorist training, kidnapping, and smuggling in the gorge. There were several known refineries for processing and selling high-quality heroin for retail sale there, and when the Chechens came in, he allegedly allied with the Wahhabis helping them move their product through Georgia in cars he supplied. Organized criminals also transferred a significant amount of arms and munitions through the territory to Chechen fighters in Dagestan and Chechnya, and Targamadze’s police personnel were witnessed escorting Chechen fighters through Georgia to Turkey and the Middle East, and bringing them back the same way.¹⁸

The Turkish channels for drugs in Russia opened in the early 1990’s, and according to the former Minister of State Security of Achara (Southwest Georgia), drugs came to the region from South Ossetia and the Pankisi Gorge. But when the Chechens moved in, from 1999-2002, the Pankisi route became the most popular. Drugs, mostly heroin, originating in

Central Asia arrived in Georgia via Chechnya. It was then sent throughout the southwestern region of the Russian Federation into Europe. The amount of drugs was large, and they were always restocked of the highest quality of heroin from Central Asia and refined in Chechnya.¹⁹

The trouble in the gorge was also a sticking point between Georgia and Russia. In 2002, it almost boiled over into Russian military intervention. A few days after the invasion in Dagestan, Georgian officials reported that a Russian aircraft had violated Georgian airspace and bombed the village of Zemo Omalo, wounding three persons. The locals conjectured that the attacks were linked to the recent Wahhabi presence in the village. By October 1999, the Georgians themselves confessed to needing to control the flow of refugees, specifically the fifty Wahhabis who they considered a terrorist threat to their internal stability because of their connection with Georgian Wahhabis who were known to use the gorge to traffic drugs. The Russian government drew attention to the gorge where Chechen terrorists and *banditz* could find safe haven, and that the 450 or so fighters who were there at the end of 1999 were linked with the struggle against international Islamic terrorism.²⁰

In 2001, the Russians officially labeled the gorge as a “terrorist and bandit bastion” and made it a part of their war on terror. Their claim came at the same time as several Chechen rebels under the command of Ruslan Gelayev deployed from the Pankisi Gorge to the Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia in what appeared to be an attempt to bring violence to the region. The Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs green-lighted the invasion, and Raduyev’s men actually shot down a UN mission helicopter. The Georgians argued they did not deploy Raduyev rather they were kicking the drug smugglers out just like Russia asked. In June, this was made somewhat farcical when Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze publicly defended the Chechen warlord and commander as a sane and educated man who happened to favor Georgia. President Putin responded by saying, “If Russia now wipes out the Chechen militants in the Pankisi Gorge, not a single soul in the world will be able to reproach us.”²¹

This turned out to be the case as in September 2002, the United States sent two-hundred Special Forces instructors to train and equip Georgian soldiers. This came after committing itself to a \$64 million plan to help Georgia fight the *banditz* and Wahhabis in the Pankisi Gorge because of the newly purported presence of al-Qaeda militants in the region. Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov even suggest Osama bin-Laden himself might have

been in the gorge.²² The Americans were also worried that the founder of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was creating chemical weapons there. In his pre-Iraq invasion address to the United Nations Security Council, Secretary of State Colin Powell declared, “We know that Zarqawi’s colleagues have been active in the Pankisi Gorge and in Chechnya. The plotting to which they are linked is not mere chatter. Members of Zarqawi’s network said their goal was to kill Russians with toxins.”²³

The warmth that followed 9/11, Putin was the first world leader to call George W Bush, was almost completely washed away by the Georgian incident as Russia took offense to the United States helping one of their main political enemies. Observers in the region also commented that the overt explanation was the fight against terrorism, but the covert explanation could have been US interest in Caspian Sea oil and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline.²⁴ However, in terms of Georgia, publicly the Russians remained fairly level-headed about the political situation because in the end they were looking towards ridding the gorge of rebels just as much as the Georgians or Americans were. They also argued that everyone wants the same thing: to rid the world of terrorism. In August 2002, the Deputy Head of the International Committee of the Council of the Federation, Mikhail Margelov, whose views frequently reflected those of the Kremlin (Putin), affirmed that, “the introduction of Russian troops would not lead to the unleashing of war between Russia and Georgia.” After talking with the Georgians and Americans, he also noted, “The US and Britain are not warring with Afghanistan. It is a struggle with terrorism.”²⁵

By 2002, the major player in the gorge was the Chechen commander and *abrek* Ruslan Gelayev. Gelayev’s “troops” operated as a quasi-police force in the region, on some occasions actually representing the Georgian Interior Ministry, and were the most involved in the drug trade that was worth an estimated \$1 billion by that time. A man of all trades, he dealt not only with the Georgian Shengelia mafia and the Georgian Interior Ministry, but also reportedly assisted the CIA in apprehending al-Qaeda agents trying to move in on his turf. He reportedly was financed by Khozh Nukhaev, who by this time was considered “one of the richest and most influential people in the Caucasus.”²⁶

Gelayev had been “frozen out” of the local drug trade by the established Mafioso until he made a deal with the Georgian authorities. In typical turf-war style, his troops aided the authorities in the apprehension of one of the most well-known local drug dealers, Yuri

Baritashvili. The dealer had been known to be an associate of the infamous kidnapping Akhmadov Brothers, who in turn reportedly had a close relationship with Berezovsky and his Georgia business protégé Badri Patarkatsishvili. With the help of the government, Gelayev had kicked most of the local dealers out, and had acquired near full control of the drug trade in the gorge. His reign did not last long though as he was soon forced to leave back to Chechnya.²⁷

With the training and resources from the United States the Georgian government sent in close to 1,000 Interior Ministry troops to rid the gorge of rebel fighters and criminals. Highly effective, by the end of September 2002 they had essentially kicked out the 750 or so rebels and 100 “foreign fighters” from the area. The Georgian Minister of the Interior, Koba Narchemashvili, announced that the military phase was over, and that the Chechen guerrillas were no longer in the gorge or the surrounding areas. Nevertheless, the *banditz* had to go somewhere, and many ended up back in the Russian Federation Republics of Chechnya, Dagestan, North Ossetia, and Ingushetia. This made the Russians upset and they quickly blamed the Georgians for bringing more criminals onto their territory, for which the head of the Georgian Border Guards, Valery Chekhedze commented, “Georgia cannot be blamed for any guerrilla groups operating 100 kilometers inside Russian territory.”²⁸

In Chechnya and Russia

Back in Chechnya, the war had created a recruiting ground for everyone whether they were ordinary criminals, Wahhabis, or Akhmad Kadyrov’s forces. Young men had very few options as Aset Chadayev, a pediatric nurse and former resident of Grozny put it, “young Chechen men living in Chechnya today have two choices: to wage war or to wait for Russian soldiers to arrest or kill them.”²⁹ As the war progressed, and Chechens began fighting each other, Shamil Basayev proclaimed, “You are either with us or against us.” Brothers became enemies, and ongoing demands of blood feuds for offences demanded the fulfillment of ‘duty of honor’ at any price, and no one wanted to be humiliated. An insult could mobilize one fighter, and the murder of one man would mobilize five. The murder or rape of a woman could lead to declarations of blood feud by dozens of men. Unfortunately, these were daily occurrences so Chechen men had decisions to make: if they left their wife and children to pick up arms their family was unprotected. But if he decided to stay home, he was not fulfilling

his duty for his *teip*, and in some instances would stop being the son of his father and the father of his children. Even then, he could not be certain that he would not die in a Russian *zachistki* (infamous Russian mop-ups), or at a checkpoint. In essence, “Chechen men had little choice.”³⁰

In May of 2001, unemployment was at ninety percent, out of a workforce estimated at 400,000 people. Vladimir Yelagin, a Russian Federal Cabinet minister, claimed that legal extraction of oil from Chechnya was reaching about 1,200 tons per day, of which about 300 tons were stolen and sold on the black market. With no way to earn money to feed their families young men looked to the rebels for employment. Yelagin estimated that rebels paid between \$200 and \$500 for planting a remote-controlled land mine, and if the mine killed a federal officer, another \$5,000 could be paid.³¹

A year earlier, the Russian Finance Ministry issued order number 38. The order specified that restoration funds to Chechnya would only be transferred after the ministry received proof that a certain restoration project was completed; for example the restoration of an orphanage home. This was due to the fact that almost none of the federal funds sent from Russia actually ended up in the right hands. In May of 2001, Chechen Labor and Welfare Minister Musa Vakhayev, said that he had not been able to get any of the 35 million rubles that were allocated to the republic because the capital was not there to begin a project. He added that the only reconstruction occurring in the country was “by our own two hands.”³²

To worsen matters, in June 2001, Bislan Gantemirov, the former Grozny mayor and man convicted on different occasions for rape and embezzling millions of dollars of reconstruction money for Chechnya after the first war, was appointed Chief Federal Inspector dealing with the restoration of Chechnya. After being pardoned and released from prison in December of 1999, Gantemirov was inexplicably appointed inspector by Russian Governor-General Viktor Kazantsev, leading military observer and political analyst Alexander Golts to announce that, “the federal government is running out of options in dealing with Chechnya.”³³ On 23 August, the Russian cabinet approved a draft by Vladimir Yelagin for 4.5 billion rubles (\$150 million) for restoration work in Chechnya for 2002 to be handled by Gantemirov and Yelagin together.³⁴

Not surprisingly, in late 2000, former Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin, who then headed up the Accounting Chamber of Russia (the equivalent of the GAO in the US),

announced that he had asked prosecutors to investigate senior Russian bureaucrats suspected of misusing vast sums of reconstruction cash that was headed for Chechnya. More than \$2 million had gone astray, and the two top officials in the Ministries of Finance and Economics were prosecuted for the thefts. Kadyrov, who was also being looked at for corruption, remarked "I don't know where the money sent by the federal authorities to Chechnya is going. I don't manage it."³⁵

The Audit Chamber, however, contended that Kadyrov's Kremlin-installed administration misspent just under \$1 million, including \$146,000 which was earmarked to pay the wages of teachers and doctors in Chechnya, but in fact was "spent on travel and purchases by Kadyrov's officials." Officers from the Ministry of Defense, MVD and FSB were drafted to serve on the auditing committee. Showing how dangerous the republic had become, during the course of the audit two of the officers died, and the family of one of them was subjected to threats.³⁶

Running drugs and guns, kidnapping, siphoning oil, and stealing pensions were major crimes being committed in the republic at the time, but the one that most affected the Russian government's outlook was that of terrorism. Oftentimes terrorism and crime are looked at as distinct, but in the case of Chechnya and Russia terrorist acts committed by both sides were considered criminal because Chechnya was still a part of the Russian Federation. The Russian Criminal Code had six different articles pertaining to terrorism or cells as a crime. Including the act itself, seizure of a hostage, falsifying a report of an act of terrorism, organizing or participating in an illegal armed formation, making an attempt on the life of a state or public figure, and/or attacking a person or office under international protection. All of these would fall under the category of "terrorism." Because of the post-war situation, the trend in the recorded number of crimes of a terrorist character went up, and most of it was due to the situation in Chechnya. In 1997, there were 1,544 recorded terrorist crimes and 419 people found guilty of committing them. By 2001, there were 5,849 recorded crimes, and 761 people found guilty of them. A rise of over two-hundred percent in only four years. The reason for the classification of terrorist acts as criminal acts, argued Russian political scientist A.I. Dolgova, was because "acts often categorized as terrorism are in fact crimes against the state and its constitution because they resemble other crimes against the law, and may be means of committing other crimes."³⁷

On 9 May the most somber event in the Russian calendar occurs as it is the day Russia celebrates its defeat against Fascism in the Second World War. At a military parade in the Daghestani town of Kaspiysk, bordering Chechnya, a bomb exploded killing 34 people, including 12 children and wounding over 130 more. A correspondent for the Russian television station NTV described the horrific scene: “There are body parts everywhere and an overpowering smell of blood.”³⁸ In Moscow, president Putin immediately denounced the perpetrators of the attack as “scum, whom we have the right to regard as being like Nazis,” later warning that the terrorist threat coming from Chechnya was “just as dangerous as Nazism.”³⁹

In between localized atrocities like those, three of the most infamous terrorist attacks in Russian history were perpetrated and claimed by Chechens on Russian soil: the hostage situation in the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow, the two Chechen “black widows” (women whose husband’s died in the war) suicide bombers at a rock concert, and the Beslan Elementary School situation two years later. On Wednesday October 23, 2002, to a crowd of 800 people, Russian actors in World War Two aviator suits were tap-dancing to the famous play *Nord-Ost*. Meanwhile, outside the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow, just blocks away from the Kremlin, a minibus drew up to the doors. Within thirty minutes, Chechen fighters wearing camouflage and carrying Kalashnikovs were up on the stage. The rebel’s demands were simple: either Vladimir Putin pull his troops out of Chechnya, or the hostages were going to be killed.⁴⁰ What followed was an enormous loss of life for both Russians and Chechens alike.

Saturday at five in the morning, after a siege of 58 hours and no negotiations taking place, an unidentified gas leaked through the ceiling as Russian FSB agents stormed the theater. What they encountered was over 850 people lying on the floor, many of them lifeless. It took over 90 minutes for the crew to empty the theater, in which 117 hostages died and all 50 rebels perished. Only one death was a result of gunshot wounds. Shamil Basayev took credit for the siege, stating that he had severed all ties with Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov, instead devoting all his time to his own force of an estimated 500 to 3,000 rebels called ‘Riyadus Salikhiin Brigade of Martyrs.’⁴¹ To make matter worse, there were no doctors on hand to treat the unconscious and when they finally arrived they were unable to identify the gas making treatment impossible. Andrei P. Seltovsky, the chairman of the

Health Committee of Moscow, said, “We don’t know the name of the gas. Only the competent bodies know.”⁴² This came at a bad time for a Kremlin that was trying to create an image of stability in Chechnya.

Although the Dubrovka Theater siege showed the ineptness of the Russian FSB to protect Russia’s borders and its citizens, Putin came out of the episode with hero status. As always, he responded with candor, “Russia will respond with measures that are adequate to the threat to the Russian Federation, striking on all the places where the terrorists themselves, the organizers and their ideological and financial inspirers are. I stress,” he added, “wherever they may be located (many believe he was talking about the Pankisi Gorge, and that this was a veiled threat to Georgia, and a promise to Chechnya)”⁴³ Either way, because of the attacks, Putin cancelled the upcoming withdrawal of 80,000 Russian troops from Chechnya, and two days later there were reports of at least thirty Chechen rebels killed in Grozny, more than the last year combined. It also caused a new wave of refugees, and repercussions from the Chechen side.⁴⁴

On 5 July 2003, three months before the Presidential elections in Chechnya, two more ‘black widows’ blew themselves up at a Russian rock concert, taking fourteen Russian civilians with them. Interior Minister Boris Gryzlov responded, “I presume this inhumane event, this terrorist act, relates to the oncoming election.”⁴⁵ Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov, who at this point was in hiding from the Russians and his Chechen enemies, quickly denied any knowledge of the attack showing that Chechnya was anything but pacified. Two days later at a government meeting, Vladimir Putin reacted fiercely: “There is no point in trying to cure these people. They need to be dug out of the cellars and caves in which they hide and wiped out.”⁴⁶

The most horrific of all events began on 2 September when Chechen rebels took over 1,200 children and teachers hostage at Middle School No. 1 in the North Ossetian city of Beslan, west of Chechnya. At Beslan, with bombs attached to their chests, the hostage takers gave president Putin the same ultimatum as those did in the theater siege; get Russian troops out of Chechnya or the hostages would die.⁴⁷ The 52-hour siege culminated when the rebels agreed to allow Russians to collect several bodies—how many is not clear—of adults killed in the initial shootout to take over the school. Instead, a battle erupted. Two powerful explosions rocked the gymnasium where most of the children and teachers had been held

without food or water. Soon after, Russian FSB helicopters roared over the school as the special-forces stormed the building with tank support behind them. At 11 p.m. on 4 September, Russian officials officially announced an end to the battle. All 30 hostage takers had been killed, and 335 Russian hostages, mostly women and children, and troops were proclaimed dead.⁴⁸

As Beslan hospitals began to fill with over 700 wounded, Putin did not apologize or express remorse for the body toll that had reached over 500 people in just those ten days, stating, “It seems that we have a choice: to resist or to cave in and agree with their (terrorists) claims, to give up and allow them to destroy and take apart Russia. But I am convinced that in fact there is no choice.”⁴⁹ Even Shamil Basayev, who took credit for the attack, was stunned by Putin’s stance. In an interview he gave to Toronto’s *Globe and Mail*, he professed to have been ‘shaken’ by Putin’s response, as he did not anticipate the president to sacrifice lives of children, especially Ossetian children, since Ossetia had been an ally in the fight in the war against Chechnya.⁵⁰

In spite of losing a leg to a land mine in 2000, and a bounty of \$10 million on his head, Shamil Basayev remained at-large. After the Beslan siege, he was moved up to terrorist number two on the FSB’s list of most wanted men. Aslan Maskhadov had already been labeled terrorist number one with the same amount of money rewarded for his death. Speculation about Basayev having ties to the military or GRU, the military’s intelligence agency, dating all the way back to 1993 and the war for Abkhazia’s independence from Georgia was one explanation for Basayev’s success at remaining free. Chechen police officer Aslanbek Dubzayev declared, “If they really wanted to take Basayev they would have done it long ago. Chechnya is not that big. The federals need him to keep the war going in Chechnya. That’s why they forewarn him of any danger.”⁵¹

On the other hand, Russian sociologist and historian Vladimir Shlapentokh, argued that could not be the case because President Putin feared no one, except for Basayev. He was the only human who influenced Putin’s policies, and it was the Russian media who made him almost invincible, “an immortal bandit with numerous ties to the high echelons of the Russian political establishment.” Shlapentokh argued that Putin was much too powerful to allow anyone in the Russian government to be linked with Basayev. However, when the terrorist himself said that Beslan was financed by the Russian government, and two-thirds of the

Russian people believed it, Putin was forced to look into corruption at all levels of the government. The historian even goes on to compare him to the most infamous of terrorists, “Basayev is Russia’s bin-Laden, he is supported by the international radical Islamist community, as well as by the anger of young Chechens who want revenge.”⁵²

Whether that was true, in an interview with Britain’s News Channel 4 a year later, Basayev justified attacks on the Russian civilian population and warned of more to come. He claimed willingness to discuss a cease-fire, but only after all Russian forces were removed from Chechnya. Justifying civilian attacks, Basayev added, “We are at war and we look at the reality, and not at whether the population has weapons in their hands. People who approve of Putin’s policies, people who pay their taxes for the war, people who send their soldiers to this war...how can they be innocent? They are just without weapons.”⁵³

The Kadyrovtsy

While commemorating Victory Over Fascism Day in a Grozny stadium in 2004, a 152-millimeter artillery shell ripped through the crowd and killed Chechen President Akhmad Kadyrov (Kadyrov senior). It was the eighteenth attempt on the man’s life in a little over four years. Prime Minister Sergei Abramov was appointed president, and Kadyrov’s son Ramzan (Kadyrov junior) was appointed the new Prime Minister. Observers noted that the war in Chechnya had basically been forgotten by the public and the press, but the incident showed the people that the situation was far from under control and the Kremlin was in a tough situation. The Russians had found a man who was loyal to them, and since he was a Chechen he was also tough and militarily capable of being independent from men like Basayev and Maskhadov. He was, “someone who could bring fighters over to his side...This strategy took four years to evolve, and now it has been totally annihilated.”⁵⁴

Basayev quickly let out a statement claiming responsibility for the “small, but very important victory over Rusisa.” Former president Maskhadov denied involvement arguing that it was done by the Russian security services because Kadyrov senior was not stemming crime or violence in the republic. However, Basayev indicated that Maskhadov approved “Operation Revenge,” stating in a show of unusual solidarity, “We apologize to the real president of the Chechen republic of Ichkeria, Aslan Maskhadov, for being unable to literally throw Kadyrov’s head at his feet.” In the same statement, Basayev did something he had

never done before, he thinly threatened Vladimir Putin and the president's family. In a mocking tone, he criticized the appointment of Kadyrov junior as prime minister and threatened his life, saying, "We are interested in who will be appointed the next prime minister by Russia – Katya or Masha (Putin's daughters) should we, by the mercy of Allah, successfully conduct special operation Moska-2 (the assassination of Kadyrov junior)."⁵⁵

Kadyrov did not take the admittance or the veiled threat well. Though he was only 28 years old at the time his well-armed private army was estimated to be as high as 6,000 fighters at times. These men would come to be known negatively as the *kadyrovtsy*. On 9 June, Ramzan gave all Chechen militants three days to disarm, or else be destroyed. This threat was aimed not only at Shamil Basayev's force that was estimated anywhere from 500 to 3,000 fighters, but also at Aslan Maskhadov's 'Chechen Presidential Guard' estimated at over 3,500. Usman Ferzauli, a spokesman for Maskhadov, claimed that the threat was a PR stunt for the upcoming August elections: "If it is that easy to get things over with the militants, then why have federal services been unable to do anything for five years? Ramzan simply wants to show off."⁵⁶

The fact of the matter was that in the republic crimes were being committed on an unprecedented scale, and no one could or would stop them. A *Council of Europe* report indicated that people lived their daily lives in constant fear. Their towns and villages had been reduced to rubble, their fields were mined, their friends and relatives murdered, illegally detained (by both Russian troops and Chechens), kidnapped, raped, tortured, robbed, or simply reported as "disappeared." The *Council* argued the reason why these things were going on is because no one was held accountable. There were a few intrepid journalists, NGO's, and honest law-enforcement officers who tried to bring justice to the region, but they were outmanned. Criminal investigations into anything from theft to gross human rights violations, such as massacres of innocent civilians and assassinations of leaders and their families, were few and far between. If they reached the stage of a courtroom, which was rare, the court system was "depressingly ineffective and mostly failed to secure any convictions."⁵⁷

This was not helped by the impunity with which the *kadyrovtsy* ran the Republic. In many people's eyes, the Kadyrov's were not only traitors, but also were treating the Republic as their own criminal fiefdom. An example of this was how Ramzan and his entourage collected funds for Akhmad's presidential election while he was still alive. A majority of

ministers in the Chechen government admitted to Chechen observer and journalist Anna Politkovskaya that Ramzan just walked into their office and named a sum of money that they had to contribute. An unnamed Minister had a list apportioning the levy between officials depending on how high up they were. Deputy Ministers had to contribute \$5,000, while heads of departments were assessed at \$1,000-\$2000 per person. In Chechnya, this was an exorbitant amount of money, even for officials, if they were not corrupt. Officials were then warned if they did not come up with the money they would be sacked, or worse. This was important because civil servants more or less were the only employees in the whole republic who usually had a stable, if small, paycheck. As a result, argues Politkovskaya, half of Chechnya became indebted to the other half from borrowing and re-borrowing from each other in order to not come to the attention of the Kadyrovs.⁵⁸

Although Kadyrov senior created his own criminal economic system by taking a levy from every person possible, even garnering funds from Chechens outside of the republic with threats on their families, he dispersed some of the money like a magnanimous crime boss or *abrek* would. Most of the money did go into the family or clan coffers, but he made it a point to publicly show that he was paying for the reconstruction of Grozny, giving assistance to the poor, building schools and hospitals, and so forth. This is why, in a sense, people accepted him, not only did he have an armed retinue, but the economic system he created functioned outside of the official system and completely beyond the control of the Russian Federation. One of the main differences between the Kadyrov's reign and the anarchic years between the two wars was that the Second Chechen War was still going on.⁵⁹

Who were the *kadyrovtsy*? They were (and still are to this day) a large number of decentralized and anarchic detachments loyal to the Kadyrov family; they are the muscle. They were armed to the teeth with weaponry that included Israeli rapid-fire rifles and Berettas that were banned on the territory of the Russian Federation. They were recruited from Russian "amnestied" Chechen fighters, as Politkovskaya saw with her own eyes, meaning the Russians amnestied fighters and in order for them to not go to jail they had to fight for the pro-Russian Kadyrov. Their usual numbers ranged from 3,000 to 5,000, and their main task was to rid the republic of Wahhabis, but this soon turned into anyone they wanted to get rid of, usually meaning political enemies. Many of them were also criminals who got pardoned to be in the gang. One such man was Movladi Baisarov, a known kidnapper and man with a

federal warrant for his arrest, who left Maskhadov's fighting force for the *kadyrovtsy*. He then kidnapped three FSB officers and ransomed them for one of his comrades, and the rumor was it worked because of the Kadyrov's close ties to Moscow. There were many other stories like that. Even Shamil Basayev's Chief of Staff turned to work for Ramzan Kadyrov and became his Head of Reconnaissance. The journalist interviewed Ibrahim Garsiev, the kidnapped and tortured head of security for Rustam Saidullayev, one of the Kadyrov's main political enemies. During the interrogation, which left him looking "like a pirate," Ramzan and his head of Recon promised, "his gold watch to whoever thought up the cruelest death for me."⁶⁰

The facts were that by 2003 no outsiders really knew what was happening. What was known was that a climate of immunity reigned, and that made normal life impossible. Even the Russians were not providing details or statistics of any criminal investigations by either military or civilian law enforcement agencies. There were a few localized events documented as a petition to Russian official AN Mazhidov, the "head of the section of supervising criminal investigations of the Prosecutor's office," was given to the *Council of Europe*. The accusations ran the gamut of criminal activity. There were details of house robberies, abductions when the perpetrators were not satisfied with their loot, and loan sharking by "friends" and "colleagues." Perhaps what was worse though, is that investigators were either a part of the schemes to make money, or were indifferent to the crimes. In one instance, a woman named Khadizhaat Kaplanovna watched as masked men entered her home and abducted her son and son-in-law. Despite the masks, she recognized one of the men as a friend of her son's from the local business college. She told the investigator, Ramzan Ibragimov, about this, but he failed to do anything about it. She went to another investigator named Klindukhov, and after he looked into it he just told her to pay the 65,000 rubles ransom and be done with it. She refused, and another investigator was put in charge. The last investigator, an MA Antipov, actually found the culprits and obtained statements from them confirming their involvement. However, on his way back to the police station the statements "disappeared" and the men were never found.⁶¹

While both Kadyrov's were loyal to Russia, in fact Ramzan will later be called Putin's "main man," naturally their first loyalty was to themselves and their *teip*, the Benoi. Because of Beslan, and many rumors of the corruption and crime in the republic, the Russians sent in a

commission to monitor the fight against terrorists (Wahhabis), but also to look at the socio-economic reasons for the deprivation and poverty in the republic. It was headed by the first deputy head of the Presidential Administration, Dmitry Kozak. In May 2005, the commission submitted a report that argued the region of the North Caucasus was in a state of total disorder: there were high levels of corruption, poverty, no economic growth, and a lack of investment “due to clan activities.” It argued there was a systemic crisis of government in which “corporate clan” associations (organized crime) monopolized the political and economic resources, and had no interest in sharing or talking with the regular population. While federal assistance had almost quadrupled from 2000-2004, the gross regional product remained unchanged. Most of this was due to embezzlement that in turn ran the shadow economy and the criminal sector, then estimated at twenty-six percent of the whole economy.⁶²

It should be noted that Russian behavior in the simmering war made it easy for ideologists and vengeance seekers to take hold in the republic. There were reports of all types of crimes by Russian soldiers including arson, rape, torture, and the infamous *zachistki*, or mop-ups. The mop-ups designated an operation when a village or town was blocked, and without any sanction from the public prosecutor or any witnesses soldiers searched houses one after another and detained all suspicious people. Officially “zachistka” was called a “special operation aimed to check people’s residence permits and identify participants of illegal armed formations,” but no legislative instruments regulated these *spetsialnii operatsiia* (special operations). Even when the Russian commanders issued specific instructions not to have arbitrary violence occur during the raids, as did the Commander of the Coalition Task Force in the Northern Caucasus lieutenant-general V. Moltenskoy when he issued Order No. 145, they were rarely followed. The lieutenant-general issued the order on 24 May 2001, in June and July in the Kurchaloevsky district village of Sernovodsk, and the Sunzhensky district village of Assinovskaya, *zachistkas* were accompanied with violence against civilians, robberies, beatings, murders and the “disappearances” of numerous people, all while the provisions of Order No. 145 were completely ignored.⁶³

All this did was create a tit-for-tat that ended up causing the *Nord-Ost* and Beslan hostage situations, and perpetuated an atmosphere of lawlessness and intimidation in the republic. When Ramzan and the *kadyrovtsy* were tasked with suppressing the insurgency in

2003, they did a fairly good job of it. The problem was it was marred with brutality, suspects being taken to temporary detention centers where they were subjected to torture, threats, and beatings. So what took place after 2003 in the republic was a cycle of young men killing pro-Russian forces, Chechens fighting Wahhabis, and Russian and Chechens fighting the *kadyrovtsy* because they were pardoned criminals or looking for revenge against the criminals, and their clans.⁶⁴

To that end, the *kadyrovtsy* were running amuck. In a case of 2003 election fraud, which sounds relatively harmless on the surface, the gang in Grozny stopped a man named Bislan Khayauri for an ID check. The men were in Mercedes without license plates, and the windows were blocked out with Kadyrov's portrait. After the inspection, they shot him dead with their assault rifles and blocked off the neighborhood where the man's family lived. Having fired on the house, they then broke into it, went through the rooms, vandalized, and stole property. The victim's father was a coordinator of the election headquarters of the opposition, Malik Saidullaev. A year later reports came out that Kadyrov junior was acting with impunity: the new trend was hostage-taking of suspected Wahhabis and other rebel fighters in order for them to give up arms. A large-scale operation began in March 2004 and went into June, and was carried out in Grozny, Benoi, and Nozhai-Yurt, leading to the "arrest" of at least twenty rebel fighters and their families. Ramzan then went on television and made the following statement:

"We shall punish their relatives in compliance with the law. They are helping the bandits and they keep saying that they are helping their relatives, their brothers and sisters. But no, it is the bandits that they are helping. I repeat, we shall punish their relatives in compliance with the law. And if there is no such law, we will ask for it. We will address the State Duma of the Russian Federation with a request to adopt such a law so that they could be punished. Without this the war in Chechnya shall never be over."⁶⁵

In the meantime, the now-defunct International Helsinki Federation went on a fact-finding mission, and wrote a report on the situation in August. It detailed disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and unlawful detentions. To be precise, there were seven abductions, two cases involving torture and summary executions, one murder because of torture, and six cases of unlawful detention. Tatyana Lokshina, the program manager for the Moscow office of the Helsinki Group, told the Russian newspaper *Izvestiya* that she believed there were thousands of cases like this, but everyone was too afraid to tell the foreign peacekeepers they

were subjected to violence. The report came out right before the August 2004 Chechen Presidential election, and she commented that any type of “quasi-reforms” that supposedly took place in the republic had taken any legitimacy out of the election. She added, “The people distrust the authorities and their promises.”⁶⁶

This is no surprise, as the Chechen ombudsman’s 2005 *Spetsialnii Doklad* (Special Report), indicated that the next two years were anarchic, to say the least. There were a total of 411 abductions of Chechen civilians in 2004, and 152 in the first six months of 2005, of whom 189 were released, 24 were found dead, and 198 were still missing. Moreover, the number of people killed in the republic in 2004 was 310, of which 120 were civilians, 105 law enforcement officials, 7 bureaucrats of various ranks, 43 presumed members of “rebel” forces, and another 35 unknown persons. However, much of this information came from only one-third of the territory, as the other two-thirds were too dangerous to get statistics from. In total, from 2000-2004, there was an estimated 2,800 people who went missing, mostly men under the age of 30 years; equalling to 2,800 abductions in a little over 1,800 days.⁶⁷

In December 2005, the *Council of Europe’s* Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, led by German politician Mr. Rudolf Bindig, received a report from Russian Prosecutor General Mr. Vladimir Ustinov. In 2004-2005, there were 251 complaints related to killings that were examined by the prosecutor’s office of the Chechen Republic. In 151 cases a criminal case was opened, 93 were refused simply because of the “absence of crime,” and 7 were transferred elsewhere (where, the Prosecutor General did not know). From the years 2000-2005, the courts pronounced convictions for 30 persons accused in 21 cases relating to abductions. This meant that 2,779 abductions in the five years went unpunished. The same percentage went for rapes, thefts, torture, murder by security services of all types, and other criminal activity throughout.⁶⁸

Ramzan Kadyrov, Putin, and Their Enemies

On 8 March 2005, Aslan Maskhadov was killed in a special operation in the village of Tolstoi-Yurt, north of Grozny. Prime Minister Ramzan Kadyrov said a Chechen militant captured in the village of Nozhai-Yurt informed federal forces of Maskhadov’s whereabouts. The *kadyrovtsy* located the bunker Maskhadov was hiding in, and fired upon it. Kadyrov’s version was that Maskhadov was only supposed to be abducted, questioned, and then

promoted to Commander of Chechen Security Services. Despite blaming the assassination on a careless bodyguard, he also vowed that “terrorists, Wahhabis, and other devils” would soon be driven out of Chechnya. Maskhadov’s death was also touted by the Russian military as a huge success, and Vladimir Putin stated, “Those who participated will be decorated.”⁶⁹

By this time, Ramzan was running Chechnya, and was the Vice-Premier in name only. Much like a mob boss he picked out a place where he ran his command center. This happened to be the unsightly village of Tsentoroi, about two hours from Grozny. After his takeover, the village was described as “unsightly, unfriendly, ugly, and swarming with murderous-looking men.” Enormous fences were put up, and this is where members of the Kadyrov family and his most trusted bodyguards lived. Years ago, anyone who Ramzan did not want living in the village had been expelled and their houses given to the “bruisers of the security service.” This is where the gangster-like tortures, prisoners, and killings occurred; all of it hushed up because Tsentoroi was “above the law by Putin’s will.” In essence, Politkovskaya argued, Ramzan could do what he pleased under the guise of fighting terrorism, but in reality he was “just a crime lord in the business of robbery and extortion.”⁷⁰

Politkovskaya was one of the few journalists allowed to meet with Kadyrov in his compound. In it she describes a gray-green marble fireplace, a sauna, Jacuzzi, and a swimming pool. On all of the furniture and appliances the price tags remained in full view showing how much each item was worth in “conventional units” (dollars). His study’s chief decoration was a Dagestani rug depicting his assassinated father wearing an astrakhan *papakha* on his head against a black background. The deceased man had a “seraphic” expression on his face while his chin jutted forward in a masculine look. Like a Hollywood movie, after dark he was surrounded by armed men: in the courtyard, balcony, and all rooms. Here he lazily sat in an armchair answering questions about his role in the Chechen government, how he was a man with no faults, why he was able to kill and kidnap without discretion, why it was impossible to negotiate in Chechnya because Maskhadov was a nobody, and that he respected Basayev as a warrior and could not wait to meet him in battle. He adds, “One man dreams of being a president, another of being a pilot, another a tractor driver –but my dream is to fight Basayev in the open. My troops against his troops, with no outsiders.”⁷¹

To that end, in August 2005, a council of Chechen Mufti's declared *jihad* on Shamil Basayev and his band of 2,000 to 3,000 Wahhabi fighters. Kadyrov junior pointed out that all the clergy in Chechnya had made the decision in a unanimous vote; showing they believed those fighting against the *banditz* were involved in the most pious deeds. Moscow Carnegie Center member Alexei Malashenko believed the real Wahhabis in Chechnya would laugh at the statement, adding, "I do not think that pro-Russian forces should pursue their goals using the formula: you declare *jihad* on me so I declare *jihad* on you."⁷²

The turf war between the *kadyrovtsy* and Basayev ended on 10 June 2006 when the "Butcher of Beslan," or "The Wolf of Chechnya," whichever way he was remembered, was killed by an explosion in his lair in Ingushetia. Like most events that occurred in the region the truth was hard to find. The Russian newspaper *Kommersant* wrote a large article on the mysterious death. It was believed that this particular estate was used to move weapons from the Muslim "charities" into Chechnya, and multiple witnesses saw men in black uniforms carrying in boxes when the explosion occurred. It was later found that the shipment contained RPG's, mines, pistols, and machine guns. The FSB would later claim credit for the attack, but that was unlikely because the bombing occurred at night, and the FSB would have had no idea who Basayev was from anyone else. Secondly, the South Ossetian forensic analyst who examined the body, reported that Basayev had died looking at the mine. His report concluded, "A man whose body came to us died from a mine blast injury. The bomb was pretty powerful, a fragmentation-type, and the victim was in the vicinity of the epicenter...Most likely the bomb was lying on the ground and the victim leaned over her and sat in front of her squatting." The man was later identified as Basayev because of the previous wounds on his legs and hands.⁷³

With the two most wanted men in the Russian Federation dead, in an interview with the *Interfax* in February 2007 Kadyrov announced that, "the *banditz* underground in Chechnya has been beheaded, and the illegal armed groups completely eliminated. Peace in Chechnya has finally come, irrevocably and forever."⁷⁴ Five days later, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree removing Chechen President Alu Alkhanov, and appointing Ramzan as the new leader. On 2 March, 56 of 58 Chechen parliament members approved the appointment, and once again Chechnya was being led by a known strong man and criminal. But this time he was Putin's strong man.⁷⁵

Over the course of Kadyrov junior's reign, which continues as of 2015, things have stayed fairly calm. The simmering war saw sporadic violence, and the *kadyrovtsy* roamed the republic expelling and ridding the area of opponents. The only thing that did change were the enemies of the presidents of Chechnya and Russia, and two of the most influential of these were the journalist Anna Politkovskaya, and the Islamist Doku Umarov. The latter picking up many of the pieces after Basayev's death to become the Russian Federation's new Public Enemy No. 1. The former was gotten rid of in October 2006, when CCTV caught a young man in a white baseball cap entering Politkovskaya's Moscow apartment complex a few moments before she was executed in her elevator. She was shot three times in the chest and once in the head. Moscow immediately blamed the Chechen *bratva* in collusion with the exiled oligarch Boris Berezovsky. However, most independent observers believed that the shooting was linked to her journalistic work because she was a strong critic of Kadyrov describing him as a "coward armed to the teeth and surrounded by body guards." She was also about to publish an expose on the torture and kidnappings of Kadyrov's enemies.⁷⁶

It took over a year, but Russian security services arrested ten people as suspects in her murder. Who were they? The newspaper that Politkovskaya wrote for, the *Novaya Gazeta*, wrote that the first group consisted of "several members of a rather big and rather known ethnic gang specializing in contract murders (Chechens)." The other group, surprisingly, was comprised of former and acting officers from Russian security services of whom Politkovskaya had uncovered during her pursuit of justice as men who had covered up murders, and were racketeers themselves. This led the newspaper to three conclusions: firstly, the evidence pointed to the fact that in all probability it was the work of the *bratva* and the "police mafia" together. Secondly, it was planned and prepared meticulously by professionals who had experience in solving those "types of problems." Lastly, it was expensive because it used many people over the course of weeks as she had reported of being followed for the week before her death.⁷⁷

A year later, four men stood trial for the murder, three of which were charged with the actual murder. They included two security servicemen including Sergei Khadzhikurbanov, the former captain at the Moscow Department for Combat Against Organized Crime, and Pavel Ryaguzov, a lieutenant colonel in the FSB. The other two were Jabrail and Ibragim Makhmudov, the nephews of Chechen crime lord Lom-Ali Gaitukayev.⁷⁸ In February, all

four men were acquitted of her murder, and the uproar began. Politkovskaya's family, lawyers, and newspapers did not let it go away, and in August 2011, former policeman Dmitry Pavliutchenkov was detained as the principle organizer. In December 2012, Pavliutchenkov was found guilty and sentenced to eleven years in prison. However, during the trial it came out that the Chechen crime lord, and his nephews were the men who in fact did organize the murder. In the final sentencing, policeman Khadzhikurbanov, crime-boss Gaitukayev, and his nephew Rustam got life in prison for organizing and committing the crime, respectively. The two other brothers, Jabrail and Ibragim, were found guilty of murder and illegally trafficking firearms, but their sentences were reduced as they were not involved in the actual act.⁷⁹

Putin and Kadyrov's other main enemy was General Doku Umarov, the new "Emir of the Caucasus Emirate." He gave a rare interview in 2005 with Radio Free Europe's Andrei Babitskii. The Chechen limped slightly because he had stepped on a landmine, and his lips and cheeks had scars from fighting in both wars. Plastic surgery helped, but he still talked with a lisp, and his band of six were hiding in the mountains as a large Russian manhunt was underway to find him. He was not a Wahhabi, but a traditional Muslim who pointed out that even though Kadyrov called himself a real Muslim, he was not because Muslims live by some type of rules. In Umarov's eyes, all Kadyrov did was drink, and smoke, and "goof around," nothing a real Muslim would do. When Babitskii asked him about his relatives being kidnapped and never heard from again, Umarov answered calmly, "I don't know – maybe they were killed, maybe they weren't...All this is Allah's will and we have to accept it calmly." But he went on to argue, "As long as we have not completely liberated ourselves from the boots of Russian soldiers, I do not see any other way out."⁸⁰

In the same interview, he was asked what type of relationship he had with notorious men like Basayev, Gelayev, Barayev, and the Akhmadov brothers. It was well known that Umarov had served time in prison for murder, and that he was in the Pankisi Gorge when the bedlam occurred there. He argued, "Because of these contacts I began to be accused of this (hostage taking, drug and arms dealing)...Here is my statement: a person's guilt can only be established in court. If I am guilty, I will not lift a finger to defend myself. Prove it and that's all...Without facts, a person can say, looking at a horse, 'there is a goat.'"⁸¹

For the next nine years, Umarov was the leading figure fighting Russia and the Kadyrov regime. The self-proclaimed President of Ichkeria was not only wanted by Russia, but also Interpol, and the United States. He was responsible for kidnapping for ransom, and numerous attacks on the Russian people, including a Moscow subway bombing, the Domodyedovo Airport bombings, and frequent train bombs throughout the Federation killing hundreds. He was reportedly killed in battle in 2005 and 2009, and in a Russian Special Forces air raid in March 2011. However, a few months after his last reported death he issued a statement following the Moscow Metro bombings, saying, “To anybody who calls me a terrorist, I will just laugh in their face.”⁸²

He repeatedly flaunted the fact that the Russians and Kadyrov could not find him, calling them the *banditz*, criminals, and terrorists of the Chechen people. He was not far from the truth. Kadyrov’s regime had created a “climate of pervading fear.” Even elderly women were not off limits as a rash of complaints came to the president of young men shooting young and elderly women with paintball guns in downtown Grozny. In a press conference, the president applauded and laughed it off in a boys-will-be-boys way.⁸³

Kadyrov especially disliked “nosey” journalists, calling them “traitors and enemies of the state.” In July 2009, human rights journalist and Politkovskaya friend, Natalya Estemirova, was abducted and later found dead. Her colleague who had been working with her at the time, Elena Milashina, testified to the OSCE in Washington DC that Estemirova was murdered because a week before she was kidnapped Estemirova was investigating kidnapping and public executions by the police and *kadyrovtsy*. Five days before she was found, on 10 July, the ombudsman of Chechnya rounded up all the human rights activists he could find and told them in a meeting to watch out, and that Politkovskaya would have still been alive had she not been “snooping around.” When Estemirova’s body was found on 15 July, the authorities found DNA of three men on the body, which was unusual because it was clear she had been killed by a man who was contracted to do so. One of the person’s DNA on the body was none other than Kadyrov’s close friend, Hamzad Edelgeriyev. He of course was never indicted. The man who was charged with the murder was an “internationally wanted” Chechen criminal by the name of Alkhazur Bashayev. He was found dead a couple of days after Estemirova was murdered, and the case was wrapped up.⁸⁴

Most of Kadyrov's enemies met the same fate, Doku Umarov included. He was wanted by the United States for declaring, in al-Qaeda-type rhetoric, that the West was evil, and would eventually be defeated. He then gained international notoriety in 2013 when he video messaged a threat that the Sochi Olympic Games would not be without bloodshed.⁸⁵ To make sure this did not happen, in the well-executed operative work of the Russian Security Services before the Olympics, more than 240 "criminals and their accomplices" were arrested in 33 anti-terrorist operations. Another 65 active member of "illegally armed groups" were killed, and the Olympics went on without a hitch.⁸⁶ Most importantly, the man who took Shamil Basayev's place as "Russia's bin-Laden," was killed sometime during these raids. This time to prove that he was dead, Ramzan Kadyrov posted a gruesome picture of Umarov's body on the internet, saying this, "They said that there was no corpse... Now, for those who would like to believe that this rat is still alive, we can show him after death." Kadyrov junior added, "He was never a warrior. He was just an expert in claiming responsibility for anything that happened in the world."⁸⁷

Terror and Crime

Terrorism is expensive, it is labor intensive, and it needs to be funded in some way. It involves organization and skills in obtaining money, arms, ammunition, explosives, in training "specialists" for their jobs, collecting intelligence, and perhaps most importantly, providing ideological reasons for the acts committed. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the regions where terrorist are most active, Chechnya, Uzbekistan, Mexico, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and so on, are at the same time regions where criminal markets flourish. In a survey of law enforcement agencies in the Southern Federal *okryg*, a region that includes the Chechen Republic, over forty percent of respondents thought that the basic motivation of the leaders who commit crimes of terrorism was for the promotion of criminal enterprises, which supplies their incomes and secures their power. This was two times more than the next closest reason: that of separatism and unification of a Muslim republic.⁸⁸

Before the end of the Cold War, terror groups and organized crime groups were rarely motivated to work with each other. Criminals wanted money because money is not an end in itself, but a means to achieve status, influence, security, and territory. Although a weak state was better for criminals, their primary aim, unlike terrorist or insurgent movements, was not

to directly challenge the state or states where they did business. As terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman noted:

“The terrorist is fundamentally an altruist: he believes he is serving a “good” cause designed to achieve a greater good for a wider constituency...the criminal serves no cause at all, just his own personal aggrandizement and material situation.”⁸⁹

The convergence of terrorist groups with organized crime groups is what is called “The Crime-Terror nexus.” During the Cold War, these two groups were mostly separate for three reasons: ideological, it was bad for business as terrorist acts drew more ire and scrutiny from governments and their police, and because during that period many terrorist acts were state-sponsored. But once the Soviet Union dissolved, and the world became an open market the two groups began to mesh together for many reasons, but mainly it was now good for business. The “flattening” of these groups created new and dangerous opportunities for collaboration, and moving between them became easier. As international money laundering crackdowns began to make it more difficult to move money, especially for terrorist organizations, the natural evolution was towards finding other ways to get money. Terrorists were forced to find new ways of funding, making fraudulent documents, transportation, weapons, and safe houses: all things organized criminals could provide. Organized criminals were purely in the business of making money and gaining power, and the terrorist organizations could provide that. The merging was sure to occur, and as political scientist Chris Dishman argued, “Don Corleone could no longer order his *Mafiosi* to stay away from drug trafficking.”⁹⁰

Criminals had expertise in money-laundering, counterfeiting, bomb-making, and established illegal trade routes, but a significant benefit that terror groups brought was in destabilizing the political structures by undermining law enforcement and limiting the possibilities for international cooperation. Because of this, criminals increasingly engaged in trying to gain political power in an effort to manipulate the rising number of defunct governments in the old Eastern Bloc; whereas terrorist groups increasingly focused on crime to replace the financial support they lost.⁹¹

Nowhere was this truer than the Chechen Republic. Post-Soviet Russian criminal syndicates were largely compared to the influx of organized crime groups during America’s Prohibition. However, many of the Russian and ethnic gangs in the Federation wielded more

power because they were part of the government, they were not fighting it. This has been shown with Dudayev's government, Basayev, Umarov, and Kadyrov: Chechen leaders run their governments or military groups like mafias. Al Capone and Joseph Torrio may have had the police and politicians in their pockets, but they were not the "actual" police and politicians. Shamil Basayev and President Dudayev attained political control and had direct involvement in all political processes, they controlled the economic sectors of the state (including natural resources – oil), and the financial institutions. Much like Sicily one-hundred years ago, in Chechnya there was a distrust in the old state's ability to enforce the law. Added to this was a very large presence of young, unemployed men growing up and trained to use violence, and quickly the line between terrorism and organized crime was gone.⁹²

In clannish networks like Chechnya, the cohesion of the groups, whether large or small, did not have to be micromanaged by a leader at the top. Mutual obligations to kin were a link to mobilize them rather than a business-like or mutual favors-type of scenario. This in turn, with a couple of exceptions, created a dynamic between the rebel organizations who had conflicting motivations and ideologies, but would remain operationally unified during the two Chechen Wars and the anarchy in between them. Secular separatists, Islamists, *banditz*, *abreks*, and avengers all had the same enemy: the Russians. In addition, because of three hundred years of repression there grew a glorified subculture of violence creating expectations of developing certain skills from early childhood, including the ability to fight and withstand pain. For three centuries it had been a warring culture and many perceive themselves in that way, meaning there was a habituation of death. Thus, "this high-value-of-force/low-value-of-life approach is displayed not only by Chechen organized criminals, but by Chechen terrorists as well."⁹³

This was seen as early as 1991 in the republic as similarities in organizational structure, the fact that they were recruiting from the same pool of young men, and the crackdown in Moscow on ethnic gangs led to the natural convergence of the two groups. Men like Khozh Nukhaev fled Moscow and set up shop in Chechnya and helped the insurgents with forging bank notes, distributing counterfeit money using their routes, and dispersing the weapons left by the Soviet Army. Once the war was over however, the criminal groups in Moscow began to settle down and legitimize while it was the insurgency that became more

criminalized. As pointed out, it was the warlords and the rebels that began the large economic movement towards kidnapping for ransom, and they were the ones who divided the illegal oil trade between themselves. Moscow's intelligence failures in exploiting the ideological differences between the two groups was a key to the rise of the criminal insurgency. The *bratva* refused to cooperate with Russian security services because of their strong kinship bonds, but as time progressed, they also found that cooperation with the separatist/Islamic groups gave them opportunities to make more money.⁹⁴

Although boss Khozha Suleimanov said they were two distinct entities, and their aims and ideological beliefs differed the extensive crackdown on the *bratvas* activities once the second war started compelled many Chechen criminals to change their mind and cooperate with the rebels. It cannot be forgotten that the first war ruined Chechnya's capital and economy, and drove it into anarchy was fought to suppress the Chechen's call for independence and its criminal syndicates. Because of the war, for the past twenty years the Chechen or Russian-appointed governments inside of the Republic did not have a monopoly on violence. Criminals enjoyed more freedoms in that scenario and there have been many in Moscow and Chechnya who have profited from selling guns, drugs, and kidnapping for ransom. As rear Admiral Raja Menon and Graham E Fuller, the former Vice-Chairman of the National Intelligence Agency wrote, "Not all the region's fighters are born-again Muslims, foreign Islamic interlopers, Saudi stooges, or exiled Chechens."⁹⁵

There is a correlation between the Second Chechen War and the crackdown on the *bratva*. The Kremlin was fearful of a "fifth column," and ordered the arrest of as many Chechen kingpins as they could find. According to the Interior Ministry, the *bratva* sent large amounts of money to the Chechen rebels, how much is not known, and they were quick to blame the *bratva* for supplying money and logistics to the Chechens who were accused of the September 1999 Moscow apartment bombings. As it is still not known who did the actual bombings, if Chechen guerrillas were responsible, it could be speculated that the *bratva* would have been a good outlet for safe havens, intelligence, and supplies. It would also have been a possibility, argued Chris Dishman of the Commission on National Security, that although there is no evidence to support it the *bratva* would have had the wherewithal to organize and commit the attacks at the behest of Shamil Basayev.⁹⁶

Crime has always been about making money, and in that sense not only do criminals gain from war, but insurgents also will be less likely to negotiate a resolving of differences as long as they are making money for their enterprises. A good example of this was the above mentioned Pankisi Gorge. It was in or near a conflict zone and therefore quite hard to police, making it easy for Arbi Barayev and Ruslan Gelayev to stash their kidnap victims, and for the IMU, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and al-Qaeda to run their heroin through there on its way to Europe with the help of Chechens. Because of their close contact with the violent IMU, and because it was a natural progression from insurgent to criminal group, most Chechen structures evolved into, “an amalgam of personal vendetta, Islamism, drugs, geopolitics, and terrorism.”⁹⁷

Doku Umarov is an example of a man who evolved with the situation. He fled to the gorge in 2002 after it became known that he had provided information that led to one of his rival’s arrests, Salautdin Temirbulatov, a particularly savage field commander with a proclivity for videotaping his executions of Russian soldiers. This showed three things: firstly, Umarov was politically ruthless, like all terrorists need to be. Secondly, he was always ready to pragmatically break with former comrades in the interests of self-preservation and expediency, much like a criminal would do. Lastly, even though he followed traditional Islam, and refuted Kadyrov’s power based on the fact that he was not a real Muslim, Umarov was not afraid to carve out his niche in the \$1 billion a year, kidnapping, gun, and drug running that was prevalent in the gorge by the time he showed up. It had also been noted by the US State Department, as well as the Russian government, that the uptick in the movement of all illicit goods in the gorge began when the Chechen insurgents took over.⁹⁸

Boston and Chechnya

According to the online Russian newspaper *gazeta.ru*, in 2011 Russian security services told the FBI that Tamerlan Tsarnaev professed radical Islamic ideals, and was a deeply religious man. However, according to an anonymous US senior intelligence official that was all the information Russia gave the United States before the bombings. As part of the verification process, FBI agents did investigate his criminal and educational background, interviewed him and his family, and interviewed his classmates, but these actions gave little information into the man at that time.⁹⁹ In March 2011, the LEGAT (FBI Legal Attache in

Moscow) sent a letter to the FSB acknowledging the receipt and requested that the FSB keep them up to date on the movements of the man while he was in Russia. They also sent the receipt to the FBI's Counterterrorism Division and the FBI Boston Field Division, telling both "to take any investigative steps deemed appropriate and provide LEGAT Moscow with any information derived, for dissemination to the FSB." By June, none of the intelligence communities in the United States had found a "link or nexus between Tamerlan Tsarnaev and terrorism."¹⁰⁰

The FSB was dissatisfied with the US reaction in 2011, and commentators blamed it on the idea that the security services of the two countries had never gotten along, and were suspect of any intelligence they received from each other. One US intelligence committee member argued that anti-terrorist data from Russia had always been suspect because they typically included human rights activists and dissidents. A bigger rift occurred after the bombings as the US quickly claimed that the two brothers met with Doku Umarov in 2012 in Dagestan because the bombs were too sophisticated, and the weapons found on the men afterwards were not something that could be found on the internet. It is not completely clear why, but the FSB roundly rejected that assertion.¹⁰¹

What is known is that Tamerlan was in Russia from January to July 2012. He stayed with his family in Makhachkala, Dagestan, and reportedly prayed at the al-Nadira mosque whose founder allegedly aided Ayman al Zawahiri (current leader of al-Qaeda) while he was in Dagestan. While there, Tamerlan may have also met with the fugitive, insurgent recruiter Mahmoud Mansour Nidal. In January 2014, two American congressmen went to Dagestan and talked with journalists and intelligence agents who had been looking into his travels. They alleged that Tsarnaev had tried to join the Chechen insurgency, but was ultimately denied the chance because of his conspicuously Western style. However, upon further review, it was noted that Tsarnaev probably did not attempt to "go into the forest" – a euphemism for joining Chechen rebel groups.¹⁰²

It is still not clear whether the bombings were tied directly to Umarov and the Caucasian Emirate, which had been added by the United States Department of State in May 2011 to the Foreign Terrorist Organization list. However, according to Secretary of State John Kerry, during Tamerlan's time in Dagestan he would have seen them fight Russian forces first-hand. Speaking in Brussels ten days after the attack, Kerry said, "We just had a

young person who went to Russia, Chechnya, who blew up people in Boston... So he didn't say where he went, but he learned something where he went, and he came back with a willingness to kill people.”¹⁰³

Once Tsarnaev came back from Dagestan, he created a YouTube page that appeared to belong to him and featured jihadist videos. However, none of the videos had overt violence or any violations that sounded an alarm or would have made it legal for the FBI to further pursue an investigation. James W. McJunkin, a former top FBI counterterrorism official, did discuss a long-running investigation that took place two years prior that looked into possible money laundering and other material support to terrorist groups by Americans of Chechen or Russia origin in the Northeast. Although no arrests were made, the Russian authorities had provided the FBI with the cellphone numbers and e-mail addresses of several possible suspects. In the case of Tamerlan Tsarnaev, after interviews, investigations, and monitoring his website, officials did not have further recourse for arresting the man as he was not connected with any of the former persons of interest. In discussing Tsarnaev's YouTube page, terrorism analyst Evan Kohlman commented, “I tend to view this stuff as certainly interesting, and evincing some degree of extreme beliefs, but probably not exactly a flashing warning sign.”¹⁰⁴

An unclassified report from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence summarized the events of the day. On 15 April 2013, two pressure cooker bombs placed at the finish line of the Boston Marathon detonated within seconds of each other, killing three and injuring more than two hundred people. Although a Saudi national who was acting “strangely” at the scene of the crime was first suspected upon further investigation he was found to be innocent of any wrongdoing. However, law enforcement officials identified Chechen brothers Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev as primary suspects in the bombings. They ultimately encountered the brothers in Watertown, Massachusetts where Tamerlan was shot with a suicide vest on, and pronounced dead shortly after. His brother Dzhokhar fled the scene, but was caught the following day.¹⁰⁵

In an “It's too bad it happened, but I told you so” manner, Russian President Vladimir Putin gave his reaction to the bombings. Russia had shown indignation towards the United States for not backing them from the beginning of the first war, and as the second war began the US often criticized the use of force against civilians. In his annual Moscow Q + A

session, Putin gave his condolences, but also jabbed at the West for ignoring or sympathizing with the Chechen rebels:

“I was always appalled when our western partners and the western media called the terrorists, who did bloody crimes in our country, ‘insurgents,’ and almost never ‘terrorists’... They were receiving help, informational, financial and political support. Sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly. And we were saying that we must do the job and not be content with declarations proclaiming terrorism a common threat. Those two (the Tsarnaevs) have proved our position all too well.”¹⁰⁶

The Chechen rebels reacted as well. A slew of information went up on their website *kavkazcenter* arguing that there was very little clarity in the events. It did call the FBI’s version of events “a convoluted screenplay worthy of those cocaine fueled Hollywood nights in the 1980’s; a couple of bad guys who ‘hate our freedoms.’” The website said there could be numerous explanations for the attacks: it could have been a covert operation gone wrong; or even blowback against the United States’ foreign policy of targeting Muslims, whether dispatching them to Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib or Bagram, or targeting them for assassinations. They go so far as to say that the two brothers were working for the FBI because they wanted to demonize Chechens. They argue that to place two perfectly-timed bombs would have taken months, if not years, of planning. But the young men had no escape route, no passports, money, or plane tickets. Afterwards, Dzhokhar went to school, worked out, socialized, and sent Twitter messages. There were no witnesses, they robbed a man of his Mercedes and told him they were the bombers. Then Dzhokhar escaped a gun fight bypassing a police barrage, but not before his brother was run over with explosives so he could not tell anyone who he was working for.¹⁰⁷

At the same time though, the rebels quickly distanced themselves from the brothers stating the family was actually from Kyrgyzstan (their family no doubt were victims of Stalin’s deportations). They continued to question the validity of the two brothers being *ihadists* because there was no “Allah Allahu Akbar,” no radical organization affiliations, and no hints of hatred of the Western way of life. However, the website came out with this official statement: “The command of the Vilayet Dagestan Mujahidin (Dagestani group that is part of the Caucasus Emirate)... declares that the Caucasus fighters are not waging any military activities against the United States of America. We are only fighting Russia.”¹⁰⁸

Putin and Kadyrov used the event to up their efforts against the Chechen rebels. Three days after the bombings, three hundred Chechen troops invaded neighboring Ingushetia claiming to be hunting Umarov, but instead clashing with the local police, injuring six Ingush officers. The raid caused many of Chechnya's neighboring governments to balk arguing that invasions like that would create ethnic strife and violence. However, Dmitry Peskov, Putin's spokesman commented, "Law and order is the responsibility of regional structures." That is the key to Kadyrov's rule. By 2013, the *kadyrovtsy* numbered 30,000, and although it had the second-highest crime and terrorism related deaths in the Federation behind Dagestan, Chechnya was changing. With the help of near \$1 billion per year in federal funds, unemployment was lowered to twenty-eight percent, and the capital that had been reduced to rubble boasted new libraries, concert halls and theaters, luxury high-rises, and a mosque modeled on the famous Blue Mosque in Istanbul that could accommodate 10,000 worshippers. Although Kadyrov runs the republic like a Mafioso, being accused of the gauntlet of criminal activities, the region was not the melting pot of criminality that it once was. Heda Saratova, a Chechen human rights activist, said in an interview in Grozny:

"As far as human rights and freedom of speech, it's a disaster – everything is decided by one person: Ramzan. At the same time, we lived through the horrors of war and we are grateful for what he's done. I've been to Ingushetia and Dagestan. There weren't any wars there, but the situation is much worse than here."¹⁰⁹

Conclusion:

As the Soviet Union's economy liberalized Russian and ethnic *mafiyas* fought for a piece of the newly-privatized pie. The opportunities for trade and business, especially in Moscow and other large cities, attracted traders and "entrepreneurs" from all over the Soviet Union, and the Chechen *bratva* were no exception. Their style of behavior, which some Moscow policemen found humorous at first, led to comparisons of foreign Mafiosi as they wore zoot suits, and slicked back their hair. What was not humorous was that by the end of 1990 victims of Chechen "business methods" were turning up all over the capital with bullet holes in their heads or backs. Not only did they make a name for themselves as a tough bunch, but they also excelled at moving stolen cars, prostitution, and providing *krysha* (a roof or protection). Men with non-Slavic names like Nikolai "Khoza" Suleimanov, Movladi Antlangeriyev, Khozh Akhmed-Nukhaev, and Ruslan Labazanov became the "godfathers" of the Chechen *bratva* while becoming household names in the cities that they operated.¹

The Chechen Takeover

The *vory v zakone*, or traditional "thieves in law," did not take the idea of a Chechen takeover lightly. In early 1991, a mob war began and the Moscow police started to round up as many Chechen *bratva* members as possible. Despite this, the Chechens had become too large to control and by 1993 brazen daytime assassinations and shootouts covered by the Russian press were often compared to Chicago during prohibition. Once one of the Soviet Union's safest cities, in 1993 Moscow's murder rate, auto theft, and burglaries all went up exponentially. It was clear that the Russian government was not prepared for the sophistication and violence that the breakup of the Union would bring forth. The Russian people and politicians began asking President Boris Yeltsin to do something about the "criminal revolution" and in March 1994 they initiated "Operation El'Brus." This was an interesting name for the crackdown on criminals because not only is Mount El'Brus the tallest mountain in Europe, but it is also located in the Caucasus. It was not lost on people that they were going after ethnic gangs from the Caucasus, most notably the Chechens, Azerbaijanis, and Georgians. Of the 10,000 people rounded up in Moscow, eighty percent were from these three Republics.

Meanwhile in the Republic itself, the dapper-looking Dzhokhar Dudayev won the presidential elections. The “Godfather of the People,” unilaterally declared independence from Russia and immediately released hardened criminals from Grozny jails in order for them to become his “national guard.” Yeltsin called him an “elected warlord” and journalists and observers commented that under the president Chechnya became a “fantastic customs free zone.” Unemployment was rampant, and the rise in ethnic nationalism created a volatile situation. While the Soviet Red Army sold or left its war materiel as it exited, Dudayev and other warlords took advantage and the Republic’s population voluntarily armed itself. The government and its enemies also enriched themselves on the oil reserves and refineries that the Republic was known for. Once the Soviets and their Russian engineers left, output fell precipitously. This was especially important for the Russians and Chechen governments because both had banked on oil revenues to pay employees, and to build the Republic up after three years of stagnation.

A “black spot” was created by the lack of jobs and revenue from natural resources. Although Dudayev was a strongman there were chinks in his armor as many of his former allies, Gantemirov, Labazanov (who proclaimed a blood feud against Dudaev), and Avturkhanov to name a few, created loose clan alliances with other organized crime lords. With financial and supply backing from the Russian government, the armed groups rebelled against Dudayev, and a turf-war for supremacy began. The quick, but fierce, civil war saw Dudayev and his troops come out on top. The president had created a government that was based on the intricate social structure of his *teip*, which meant that all paths to power and wealth ran through his family, and hand-picked entourage; many of whom were connected in some way with the Chechen *bratva*. Soon after Dudayev’s victory, the Russian government felt something needed to be done, and war was to follow soon after.

Russian Rhetoric and Chechen Society

The way Yeltsin described the Chechen people was not a new phenomenon in Russia as the region and its inhabitants had been idealized as rough and warlike in the Russian imagination since the time of Lermontov and Tolstoy. What added to the romantic idea was that the people lived in a decentralized society that was kept together by their *teips* and a set of informal laws called *adat*. The most prominent in the martial society being that of the

blood feud. What grabbed much attention, not only from the Russian population, but the Army who was sent down to conquer the land, was the distinctly Northern Caucasus “honorable bandit,” or *abrek*. Before the Russians arrived, the fugitive was an outcast of society, and they were a main reason why Chechnya had become known as the “Robber Republic.” That changed in the nineteenth century when the Russian Army invaded, and the criminals became folk-heroes that defied the imperialists. These men were daring like wolves, and much like the national animal, they were not afraid to take on any enemy because they were fighting the true fight; they became legendary, more than mere humans.

In order to pacify the region of fighters and thieves, and to connect Russia with warm sea ports, in the early nineteenth century the Russians sent down General Alexei Ermolov. Through force and repression the Army moved through Chechnya and became the key force in creating a rebellion led by *abreks*, which in turn cemented them as heroic, tragic figures fighting against the injustices brought on by the foreign intruders. The Russians however, began calling them “crooks,” “disrespectful,” “trash,” an “animal people,” “Russian skull collectors,” and likened the Republic to a “den of thieves, and a *banditz* hideout.” The Russian invasion also united the intermittently-fighting *teips* as traditionally when the region was under attack the clans would come together to fight off the intruders. Much like the Chechen Wars fought 150 years later, fighting in the Caucasian War became a type of raiding and retribution, guerrilla warfare that the mountaineers excelled at it. Kidnappings for ransom also rose exponentially, and men like the Imam Shamil oversaw tactical kidnappings that netted them men and money. It was lucrative enough that a second economy flourished during the war based only on the hostage-negotiation trade.

Although Shamil did not completely unify the whole region against the Russians, many of the *teips* and *abreks* fought with him due to the Russian Army’s behavior. By the 1850’s, the Russian punitive campaign, which saw massacres in villages and *auls* throughout Chechnya, had turned the people against them. The heavy-handed Russian laws that were enforced, especially that of disarming all Chechens, were inconceivable and an affront to the people who grew up owning and using firearms. This is best known in a Caucasian proverb that argued, “To disarm a man is akin to pulling off his trousers.”² As the war concluded with Shamil’s surrender in 1859, the Russian authority’s first step was to try to eliminate the bands of *abreks* declaring them “robbers, killers, and true raiders who lived outside the law.” But it

was soon found that would be a near impossible feat. They rode the familiar terrain better than the Russians; they could hide in the mountains with ease, and usually with the help of the local population; and lastly, the raiders and thieves could not go back to a life of farming so a large anti-Russian campaign was headed by the bandit formations. This was the main turning point for the *abreks* as they became known not only for their daring, anti-Russian raids, but they were also looked on as heroes rather than criminals fighting against an imposing foreign power.

For the next thirty years, small rebellions led by *abreks* showed that they had become the leaders of Chechen cultural expression. The word had developed into a term of respect that was earned, and the honor was not bestowed on everyone. Stealing, pillaging, and killing is what outlaws did, but once the Russians came, the *abreks* looked not to their own well-being, but the well-being of society. They opposed Russian colonization through crime and bravery, and became hallowed for fighting a war that was not geared towards greed, lust or boredom, but rather a *ghazavat* in the Chechen sense: a holy war that was undertaken by outlaws for the defense of the homeland.

The epitome of this new hero was the *abrek* Zelimkhan. A man who was imprisoned by the Russians due to a blood feud, escaped, and then vowed revenge on all the Russians who dishonored him and killed members of his family. He became famous not only for finishing blood feuds, and robbing from the rich while giving to the poor, but for telling the Russians where and when he was going to strike. He was known by everyone, hidden by the populace when running, and by 1910 he became one of the most famous outlaw in the lands that were controlled by Russia. Three years later Zelimkhan was finally cornered and killed, and *abrek* activity went down considerably. This was true until the 1917 Revolution as many of the mountaineers saw the revolt as a signal to free themselves from the Russian empire.

At the same time underground Sufi Islam brotherhoods, the Naqshbandi and Qadiriya, arose to combat the Russians as well. Lead by one of the most important Sheikhs in Chechen history, Sheikh Mansur, the religious fighters were termed by the Russians as *murids*, and their movement as *muridizm*. This crusade manifested itself as a national liberation movement that combined the religious teachings of Sufism with political action. The Chechens called this *ghazavat*, or a war of liberation against the foreign intruders to secure the triumph of Islam. Sufism was a good fit for the Chechens as it was more elastic in tying

local customs with the individual's relationship with Allah, and the greater ideal of Islam: a universal brotherhood. The bands of Naqshbandi and Qadiriya that fought against the Russians and their imposing laws were soon seen by the Russians, and some Chechens, as criminals and outlaws and many joined the ranks of the *abreks* who were also fighting the Russians.

This is not to say that all Chechens accepted the tenets of Islam or the brotherhoods without a fight. Much like the 20th and 21st century Chechen Wars, during the Caucasian War against the Russians there were also small skirmishes between the Islamists and Chechens who did not want to replace their customs and laws with Islamic ones. The man who began the process was the Imam Shamil. The Imam created a hierarchy of power with him at the top while his appointed deputies dispensed justice on his terms. Each *naib*, or deputy, had around 300 armed men who were able to fight on a moments notice. In supplanting local tradition (*adat*) especially the blood feud, with sharia law, the Imam made many enemies as the predilection for defying authority outside of the clan remained strong. The Imam was also the law unto himself and his family and fighters excelled at the traditional kidnapping for ransom. Before his surrender and deportation to Russia in 1859, Shamil had become the most wanted and famous bandit in Russia, much like his namesake Shamil Basayev would be over one-hundred years later.

After Shamil's surrender the brotherhoods went underground as *zikh*, the Sufi tradition of chanting and dancing, was outlawed, and the Russian administration went on the offensive against Islam as they understood *adat* better than sharia law and felt it would keep the Chechens closer to the empire. However, all this did was entrench the two brotherhoods secrecy, and many *murids* not only worked with gangs of *abreks*, but became outlaws themselves. In essence, much like the *abreks*, the Russians had legitimized the Sufi brotherhoods as semi-legal entities, and the "Islamic social bandits" came to be as important to the anti-Russian campaign as the *abreks*.

In the chaos of the revolution, the mountaineers saw a chance for freedom from the Russians, and created the "Union of Mountain Peoples," with its own constitution. In response, and a show of what was to come, the Bolsheviks quickly countered with the "Terek Soviet Republic" to oversee the government in the Northern Caucasus. Politics aside, some of the fiercest fighting in the Revolution from 1918-1921 was in the Chechnya and neighboring

Dagestan. It was chaotic in that some Chechens chose to fight for the Whites, some for the Reds, and some against both. Because there were "only ten Communists in all of the North Caucasus" bands of *abreks* and *murids* joined together to fight the atheistic, foreign invaders. The turning point came in 1920 when the Red Army got the upper hand on Denikin and his White forces, and made a concerted effort to rid Chechnya of its "bandit gangs" by going after sheikhs, *mullahs*, *kulaks*, and *abreks*. In April of that year, *Revkom* or the Revolutionary Committee, was created to clarify the goals of the Bolsheviks, to hunt and find counter-revolutionary bands, and to purge the Party of its "enemy elements." To that end, a year later the North Caucasus War *okrug* (districts) was created, and by sheer numbers and with the help of many *abreks* who were fighting for their own agendas, the Bolsheviks pacified the region enough to take control once the Revolution was over.

When the Bolshevik army finally established control over the region in the 1920s, then nationalities commissar Joseph Stalin, hatched a scheme to subjugate the North Caucasians. It encompassed embedding enough ethnic, linguistic, and religious contradictions into the political spectrum in order to preoccupy the locals and ensure that Moscow's firm hand would be required to maintain order. As Ali Kazikhanov, the editor of the influential *Severny Kavkaz* commented, "It wasn't just divide and conquer. It was divide, conquer, and tie up in trouble."³ Much like the Russians before them, all the Bolshevik's policies did was turn the population against them, and by driving the *abreks* and *tariqas* underground it gave them a social status that they could not have created by themselves. Banditry and sabotage followed. Production was non-existent and those unable to work began stealing from the Party. In order to stem the tide of crime, Stalin brought down the OGPU (secret police) to combat "political and economic counter-revolution, espionage, and banditry," and gave the police permission to shoot "all persons apprehended while participating in banditry or armed robbery."

For the next twenty years constant OGPU and other Soviet military raids in the Republic were common as the authorities went after criminals, *abreks*, and *murids* for the crimes of counter-revolutionary activities, wrecking state property, and most importantly, banditry. At the end of the 1920's banditry rose, and once again it was foreign influence the created it. This time it was collectivization, and famine. Once the Republic was forced to give up their private property and sent to *kolkhozes* crimes against the state multiplied with the massive destruction or illegal selling of state property. In 1934, a Stalinist mini-terror

occurred in the Republic in order to stem criminality. However it was not just *abreks* and common criminals that were being hunted, but the Naqshbandi and Qadiriya as well as the leader's main goal was to completely eliminate the two underground brotherhood's existence.

When World War Two started, and the Red Army began to force conscription, one of the highest rates of desertion or avoiding conscription of any Republic was Chechnya. Two of the most important *abreks* in Chechen history, Khasan Israilov and Mairbeck Sheripov, also made their claims as freedom fighters against the Soviets at this time. Sometimes working together, the two criminals formed groups in order to harass anti-banditry units of the NKVD and the "Main Directorate for the Struggle Against Banditry," or GUBB. Eventually both men were hunted down and executed, but not before Stalin and Beria had made a decision about the future of the Chechen people. Although many Chechens fought in the war for the Red Army, and over fifty won the highest medal that in the military, the Order of Hero of the Soviet Union, this did not spare them from *Operatsiia Chechevitsa*, Operation Lentils.

The deportations of over 400,000 Chechens and other North Caucasians to Central Asia has been well-documented as the most important event in Chechen history. For this paper it is important for three reasons. Firstly, it is still very much in their consciousness today, and has been explained as one of the factors for their brutality and daring in the organized crime arena. Secondly, while in exile and in gulags throughout the east they became known for their close-knit communities, and ruthlessness even in the most notorious or prisons. Lastly, in 1945 the brotherhoods were also outlawed causing them to go underground as illegal groups. In the gulags Solzhenitsyn witnessed the "rough" and "arrogant" people who typically took over their area of the prisons, but were also freedom-loving and gracious hosts. In the Kazakh SSR, where many of the Chechens were sent to, there were not enough jobs or fertile places to live, and not only did illegal "anti-state" rebellions ensue, but also "unauthorized illegal exits" as many decided to go back to their homeland. Not only did the Chechens surpass all others in rebelliousness and criminal tendencies, but they were proud of it. As the famous author wrote, "They were capable of cattle rustling, robbing a house, or simply taking what they wanted by force...They respected only rebels...and if we feel that we have earned the respect of others we should ask ourselves if we live like them."

It was also in exile that the two Islamic *tariqas* thrived as they became a symbol of national affiliation and a way of demonstrating their protests against the deportations. They also safeguarded group solidarity, but most importantly, they also ensure group survival. Once the peoples were allowed to return to their homelands in 1957, the *tariqas* quickly and illegally inculcated themselves into Chechen daily life with total disregard of the laws put forth by the Soviet regime. They recorded and transmitted *magnizdat*, or illegal religious materials on tape. They found places for underground mosques and schools, performed illegal weddings, passing out Korans, and practicing *zikr*. The “Sufi *banditz*” however were not just religious criminals. In places, they were also arrested for extorting the local populace, stealing from *kolkhozes*, *kalym* (bride stealing), running “cash establishments,” and murder. In many cases, by the 1980’s, there was no line between being a criminal and a *murid*, and some in the Soviet press started calling them “*abrek*-mullahs” as the Soviets not only had the local police hunting down the “illegally formed groups,” but the KGB as well.

The Soviet Collapse and the Bratva

No matter the effort by the authorities the *tariqas* thrived, and with them all the unlawful activities that they took part in and promoted. By the time Gorbachev had come to power the nationalities issue was a major concern for the Soviet government. Republics like Chechnya had become known for their anti-Soviet feelings and “second” or “shadow” economies where people got their day-to-day products that the government could not provide. This was especially true for Chechnya because not only they did they have their own historic social rules in *adat* and religious laws in *sharia*, but they were also one of the nationalities (and religions) who were most severely put down by the Russians and the later the Soviets. Chechen society was fluid and known for adapting to their situation, and the Soviet times were no different. Informal networks based on clans formed before *perestroika* and *glasnost*, but were exacerbated by the economic and political liberalization. These informal networks would naturally become crucial in the formation of the Chechen *bratva* in the late 1980’s because they were based on nepotism, mutual protection, and patron-client relationships. In addition to the deportations and treatment during Soviet times, and the idea that children were brought up to distrust outsiders, and to be able to handle themselves and their weapons, it was a logical step that the clans would turn into syndicates.

The Chechen clans formed a system based on collective reputation compared to alumni at an Ivy League school, albeit a violent one. They used networks to offer hope of finding jobs, a business partner, or even a wife. Most importantly, their reputations as “violent entrepreneurs” allowed them to recruit young, dangerous, masculine men: all key components in Chechen society and the criminal underworld. The ruthlessly pragmatic *obschiina* (community) or *bratva* (brotherhood) became so entrenched and legitimate that they began to franchise the name Chechen out to other groups who would do their bidding for them while the Chechens took a percentage of the spoils. Although this meant that the secretive, family-based group allowed non-Caucasians into the fold it also meant that the groups underneath the Chechens had to carry out the orders of their bosses or the brand would be devalued, and the *bratva* made sure the penalty was paid in those instances. While the *bratva* was making a name for itself in the newly political and economic liberalized Russian Federation, the seeds of war were sowing in Chechnya proper.

Under Dudayev’s self-appointed *teip* government, the Chechen economy based on legal enterprises, mainly oil refining, had essentially stopped. The illegal economy, based on stealing oil, printing fake money, running check scams, drug and gun trafficking, and numerous other petty crimes, was flourishing. The President’s armed “guards” and *mafija* began evicting people from their homes without reason or compensation, but most were inhabited by ethnic Russians. When asked about the crime spree that had become Chechnya, the President replied, “Real men have to bring home money and cars, things like that.” A feeling of fear permeated the region, and for Dudayev’s men killing a Russian for his car “was easier than swatting a fly.” It was not just the general population that was hounded by the President’s men, but also his political adversaries. In the two years before the war, over three hundred opposition leaders were killed because they had voiced their misgivings about the president.

The First Chechen War is often called a “war of secession” because in November 1991 the Chechen government under Dudayev unilaterally declared independence. Both the Chechen population and political elites were divided on the issue of their relationship with Russia, and there was no referendum held to take into account the interests of the non-Chechen population. Russia did intervene in Chechnya to protect its territorial integrity, and because Dudayev had shunned the Russian government many in the Russian government felt

the same way. Political scientist Bruno Coppitiers argued that although in principle the lawlessness in Chechnya could have justified the use of military force the facts were that the collapse of law and order was a general feature in the Russian Federation at the time. The need for the Russians to disarm the *banditz* and other paramilitary groups did not justify a full-scale, because as the author argued, the facts were that the Russians were arming many of them who were opposed to Dudayev. In the end, the threat of the domino effect that Chechnya could have started was a scary thought for the Russian government, and centuries of imperialism made it so the Russians would have not been able to accept the loss of even a small part of its population and territory.⁴

In part this was true, but much of the rhetoric immediately before and after the invasion centered on not only the criminalization of the Republic, but the idea of Chechen being criminals as a whole. It was Yeltsin who adamantly stated in a nationally televised address that “the reign of banditry on Chechen soil poses a danger to our entire country” adding that “law and order on the territory of the Chechen Republic will be restored. Grozny should be cleansed of criminal elements shortly.”⁵ Interestingly, the way that the Russian government looked upon the Chechens during the first war never wavered, whether they were Dudayev’s regime or groups committing terrorist acts. After the June 1995 Group of Seven meeting in Halifax, Canada, held just after the Buddyonovsk hostage situation, Yeltsin came out with a statement defending what the Russians were doing in Chechnya. By this time they were not just fighting organized criminals, but terrorists as well. However, the Russians believed that there was no distinction between the two. He told the world that his friend Bill (Clinton) understood Russia’s situation, and that Russia had to “destroy those terrorists and *banditz*.” In describing the Chechens to the Group of Seven leaders, Yeltsin added, “this is what kind of people we’re dealing with, what kind of horrible criminals with black bands on their foreheads (Muslim fighters). They now much better understand that this is the only way that we can deal with these criminal elements.”⁶

Political columnist and Pulitzer Prize Winner William Safire argued that it was all part of Moscow’s plan. In order for the war to be looked on with favor they needed to make the world believe that the Chechens were “a bunch of born hoodlums and religious fanatics,” and that “their criminal clans are running an island of banditry with in the Russian Federation.” Interestingly, the op-ed piece starts like this leading the reader to believe that he is going to

make an argument against Moscow, but that is not the case. Rather he argued that the US should have looked for Yeltsin to accommodate the Chechens, and to negotiate a peace that would have left the Republic in the Russian Federation without going to war. Because as Safire admitted, the criminal situation in Chechnya was a large problem for the sovereignty and future of the Russian Federation. The fact was the Chechen *bratva* and their enforcers permeated throughout the metropolises of the country; Grozny was a center of crime and corruption; and militant Islam, whose symbol was “a crossed crescent and Kalishnokov,” were a threat to peace, stability, and law and order to the Russians.⁷

Wars Create Opportunities

The December 1994 Russian invasion on Dudayev’s “Mafioso-criminal regime,” and the fact that the much larger Russian Army could not gain an advantage in the war, led Moscow to wonder how much help the Chechen *bratva* was giving to Dudayev and other groups fighting. One of the leaders of the group, Nikolai Suleimanov, argued that the war had created “Two Chechnyas.” There was the insular Republic fighting a war, and the *obschiina* outside that was giving little help to the war effort. There is evidence that it was more complicated than that. When the war started, Dudayev sent an emissary to meet with the heads of the *bratva* asking for their support, and he was rebuffed. Mafia members in Moscow were also adamant that they did not support the war because the extra police presence due to bombings blamed on Chechens was not good for business. The Russian government argued that the *bratva* had dispersed throughout the Federation in order “destabilize” Russia, and even Suleimanov agreed that pragmatic deals had been struck. But the fact was that even if the *mafiya* was supplying Dudayev with weapons or money it was impossible to prove because the Chechens would have never discussed such things with outsiders.

What the war did was create opportunities for criminal gains to the bold. The Basayev brothers moved guns, soldiers, and drugs through the Abkhaz Route that was established earlier in the Abkhazian fight for independence against Georgia. Another key base for the rebels was in the small city of Shali southeast of Grozny. There the rebels not only moved weapons and ammunition, but also counterfeited \$100 bills allegedly with the help of the Iranians. However, as the war progressed terrorist attacks on hospitals in Buddyonovsk and Kizlyar, and the appearance of Islamic fighters from the Middle East and Afghanistan

changed the landscape of the war. By 1995, it had evolved into not only a fight against *banditz*, but also terrorists. Men like Shamil Basayev, Salman Raduyev, Arbi Barayev, and the Jordanian “Khattab” made a name for themselves with their Islamic rhetoric while defying the Russians. After Raduyev’s siege, Yeltsin admitted that the war had become a “with terrorists and *banditz*.” Five days after the reprimand, on 21 April 1996, President Dudayev was killed by an airstrike near his hometown, and the Chechens vowed to fight even harder against the Russian invaders.

This proved to be true, and after another year and a half of fighting, the Khazavoyourt Accords were signed ending the war in December 1996. Russian presence in the Republic did not completely go away though, as the criminal situation made it one of the most policed areas in all the Federation. After the war the Republic’s economic infrastructure was non-existent, the capital was in ruins, unemployment was anywhere from eighty to ninety percent, internal security was non-existent, legal government revenue from the oil pipelines was minimal, and the better educated Chechens and Russians had left the region. It receive unsubstantial economic support from the Russian Federation, and much of that was siphoned off into private coffers much like the oil supply. Likewise, the international community offered little help not only because of concerns about Russian sovereignty, but also because Chechnya was unable to effectively use outside aid. The “militarized Chechen elite,” men like President Maskhadov, and field commanders Shamil Basayev, Salman Raduyev, Movladi Udugov, and Zelimkhan Yanderbiev, oversaw the violent criminalization of society.⁸

Hostage taking, contract killings, thefts, and other crimes were an annoyance to the Dudayev regime, but to the newly elected President, Aslan Maskhadov, they became an uncontrollable problem. While Dudayev tried to bring as many criminals as he could into the fold, Maskhadov tried to distance himself from the “slave generals” who had made kidnapping for ransom a legitimate business. Men like Arbi Barayev sought to undermine the government, and during the second war he lived in a key town under Russian control a few miles away from a checkpoint, and his car was reported to have had an FSB ID allowing him safe passage. Maskhadov was also being undermined by the Russians as in many cases they were paying the large ransoms, and the kidnappings were a reflection of the state’s weakness. At the same time, the President was also under pressure from the newly powerful Islamic movement of Wahhabism.⁹

The Saudi-based faction of Islam, which viewed *jihad* as the core of Islam, came into the region and rejected both Sufi brotherhoods as idolatrous and invalid. Men like Raduyev, Basayev, and Khattab, adhered to the principals of no smoking, drinking, shaving of beards, and recognizing no law except that of *sharia*. The Wahhabis formed groups throughout dispensing their own justice and getting into firefights with government troops, all the while financing themselves through kidnappings, raiding, stealing oil, and running drugs and guns. Although they were not the only groups who had made kidnapping a legitimate business, almost two per day, they were involved in the high profile abductions of Yeltsin's envoy Valentin Vlasov, and English workers James Jones and Camilla Carr. By 1999, the Republic was a "thieves den," there was little government control, and the Russians were gearing up to stop the criminality that had overtaken the whole region. The last straw came in March when Russian Deputy Interior Minister, Gennady Shpigun was forcefully taken out of his plane at the Grozny airport. Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin was quick to criticize the Chechen government for their ineptness, adding, "Several thousand armed scoundrels dictate their will to Chechen society."

This type of rhetoric continued into the post-war years of "independence" for the Chechens. The Russian government under Yeltsin and Putin, perhaps embarrassed that they could not tame a Republic the size of Connecticut, referred to Chechnya as a place populated by "*banditz*, thieves, terrorists by nature; a whole nation of criminals who must be suppressed by any means, however ruthless."¹⁰ After three years of quasi-independence, the situation worsened and the government became more hardline. By May 1999, Prime Minister Stepashin warned that in Russia, "there is no place" for those criminals who kidnap and kill people" and who for that reason must be "eliminated." Lawlessness in Grozny was exemplified by a downtown, evening shootout between two rival groups in early May that left three dead and ten wounded, including innocent bystanders. Three months later, a group of 1,500 to 2,000 Wahhabis under Basayev and Khattab invaded neighboring Dagestan in order to create an Islamic Emirate in the region. Then at the end of August, a series of bombings in Russia proper were immediately connected by the Russian government to the Chechen rebels. Although the subsequent invasion was labelled a "war on terror," the Russian government's rhetoric for the first war did not change as they referred to the people they were fighting as *banditz* and criminals.¹¹

With the inception of the second war in 1999 the Russian military gained control over the economic infrastructure; mainly oil wells and refineries. They then established a loose police regime over the Republic and surrounding territories and the opportunity for cooperation between the *bratva* and the Chechen terrorists went down considerably. One of the main indicators of this was the precipitous fall in the number of criminal kidnappings for ransom. Another trend was that many of the organized criminal activities attributed to the *bratva* were taken over by the separatists to fund the war effort and terrorist attacks. There were reports of both criminals and terrorists using false documents to move around Chechnya, and much of this was done by bribing police officials or using specialized firms connected to the police. The Wahhabi Movsar Barayev, the man who took over the Dubrovka Theater in 2002, had obtained false passports from a company run by an ethnic Chechen. In 2003, the Russian Organized Crime Unit “came upon a company by chance” by the name of Alliance-Tour. They found that the firm specialized in overseas smuggling of criminals and persons on the federal wanted list. Of the three-hundred people that the firm had helped leave the country, almost all were Chechens wanted for *banditizm* or terrorism.¹²

In the Republic in 2000, Russian President Vladimir Putin appointed Chechen Mufti Akhmad Kadyrov as Chechen President even though Maskhadov was still the elected leader. The Chechen leadership countered the appointment by putting a \$250,000 bounty on the Mufti’s head, with a Mercedes Benz (the car of choice for the Chechen *bratva*) thrown in as well. Much like Dudayev’s regime, the Mufti and then his son Ramzan, oversaw a government that was corrupt and run like an organized criminal syndicate. The only difference was that the Kadyrov’s were on the Russian’s side. Hundreds of millions of rubles earmarked for Chechnya’s reconstruction went missing, and the only answer Kadyrov had was that he was not in charge of dispersing said money. What he did oversee was the creation of his own criminal economic system, and the *kadyrovtsy*: a semi-official armed group of ex-cons and rebels pardoned in order to protect the President.

Kadyrov took a levy from every Chechen he could, including those outside Chechnya by threatening the family members of those living in the Republic. He especially went after politicians and any workers of the state as they were the only people in the Republic who had a chance of getting a regular paycheck. He also illegally detained thousands of his political enemies, and both the collection of monies and “policing” of the Republic were left in the

hands of his henchmen, the *kadyrovtsy*. After Akhmad's 2004 assassination, his son Ramzan took over and brought things to another level. A turf-war ensued between the Russian-backed President and the Wahhabis in which both sides were blamed for extrajudicial killings, the *kadyrovtsy* were running amuck, and Ramzan was administering the Republic from his crime boss-like compound outside of Grozny.

Meanwhile Chechnya had become an example of how terrorism and organized crime began to converge after the Cold War. In order to fight both the wars against Russia, and to gain control against internal enemies, many of the rebel groups and Wahhabis resorted to criminal enterprises to fund themselves. Dudayev, Basayev, Barayev, the Kadyrovs, and many others engaged in some form of criminal activities that included kidnapping for ransom, illegally arresting and killing their enemies, trading in guns and drugs, stealing oil, and prostitution. Chechen leaders had become the government, the criminals, and the terrorists wrapped into one. They had a substantial recruiting ground of well-armed, war-tested, unemployed young men, who grew up in a society based on kinship and a three hundred year history of foreign repression and honoring *abreks* and underground Islamic brotherhoods. This "habituation to death" created a situation in the Republic that has been described as a "high-value-of-force/low-value-of-life" situation that both criminal organizations and terror groups thrive in.

Things remained fairly static under Ramzan. The second war petered-out, and with the help of the Russians and a little luck, his two main enemies, Aslan Maskhadov and Shamil Basayev were killed. With the *kadyrovtsy* he ran the Republic like it was his empire detaining or killing his enemies, embezzling, extorting, and instilling fear in the average citizen. Despite the strongman's clear disregard for the law, and the fact that Chechnya was still the second most dangerous Republic in the Russian Federation behind neighboring Dagestan, there were some improvements seen. The capital was being invigorated, public buildings, roads, and monuments were being built, and unemployment was going down. Organized crime, murders, and terror also went down as the Russian-backed, Mafioso-government of Kadyrov began containing the situation through the threat of violence, or the actual application of it. In a society that has seen violence, crime, and terror for the last three hundred years, and excelled at all three, it is no wonder that their governments would follow suit.

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Chapter 3: The Republic of Islam

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